

## Story

### Chapter 1

December 24 1996

Looking back at the fall term, Harry smiled fondly. He had learned as much about himself and living as he did with his subjects. Leadership was a badge that while worn with honor, carried a heavy burden. Six months ago at this time, Harry was raging at Dumbledore for manipulating people like pawns in some invisible chess game. Harry may be the king piece in this particular game, but every pawn, knight and bishop was precious to him. Harry had come to realize that influence, leadership and trust were more powerful than simple authority.

Yet nothing was ever perfect. Harry still had lingering doubts about that morning in Yorkshire regarding Umbridge and Bellatrix. The message that he'd received assured him that Umbridge would be alone. The addition of Bellatrix Lestrange changed the equation completely. Looking back, it was a miracle that no one had been killed. Harry recalled that things were touch and go with Tonks barely surviving. Harry was reminded of the words that Poppy had spoken to him last summer. "I know this much Harry - We are at war. People die in battle...I am suggesting that you leave the blame for their deaths on the shoulders of their killers where it belongs."

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Harry remembered arriving back to the castle the Wednesday before term started. Hagrid had seen him appear at the station and walked with him back to the castle. Hagrid had told him, "Harry, t'aint no better job anywhere in the wizarding world than right here. If things go right for ya, you'll have your pick of any job in the wizarding world. Dumbledore did. He chose to work with the kids, and learn em up right. Ya mark my words, Harry. This place is the best."

They walked the rest of the way to the castle and parted ways. Harry found the Apprentice living quarters on the third floor corridor between the library and the Great Hall. If anything Dumbledore had

understated the size and elegance of them. Opening the door he entered the common room that the four of them would share. It had a large worktable, six chairs and two sofas. On either side there were doors leading to two small bedrooms each containing a bed, a small closet, a study desk and a chair. At the end of the common room there was a nice bathroom and a fireplace. All in all the accommodations were excellent. Harry selected the room farthest away from the bathroom without the window, knowing that his roommates would value the proximity or the view more than he would.

Harry settled in, and thirty minutes later answered a gentle knock on the outer door. Professor Dumbledore was there to make certain that Harry had found his way and was making himself at home. He gave Harry a key to the Defense office that he would share with Moody. They talked about lesson plans and the old Professor suggested that Harry visit with Flitwick to get some teaching skill ideas.

Harry visited with Flitwick as Dumbledore had suggested. Flitwick described different teaching styles, and the importance of verifying that the students had enough background information to understand the topic that he was trying to show them. Harry listened as Flitwick described the challenge of transitioning from peer to leader, and made suggestions that Harry could try. He impressed Harry by mentioning that people learn differently and at different rates, suggesting that Harry explain what they would be doing, the practical application for it, demonstrate it, allow questions, and finally let people try it. After they had tried it, Flitwick suggested that Harry show them a second time to reinforce what he'd taught them, allowing the little gaps in knowledge to be filled. Harry came to realize that defense had many dimensions, ranging from recognizing dangerous situations and responding by simply running away or hiding, up to the Auror level tactics that he'd employed during the summer.

Given that the first and second year students had little real knowledge of spellwork at that level, Harry realized that he could work within the curriculum that he'd been given to use and deliver a very good learning experience by helping the students learn very basic fighting skills. Harry had noticed a disappointing starting level of these skills

the year before when they'd had the DA group and knew them to be a great starting point.

Dumbledore had initially offered Harry the Defense Instructor's living quarters, but Harry had quickly declined, realizing that he had a fantastic arrangement with the people that he was closest with. With respect to the meals, the group was welcome to eat at their old house tables, the staff table or in their own area as the need arose.

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Harry was called to visit Poppy that evening. She had been in contact with her colleague Healer Crabtree. Pomfrey had never tested anyone for being a natural healer before. Crabtree hadn't either, so there was no structured testing methodology to use. Poppy examined the evidence as she knew it.

-At the time Tonks was near death and expected to die.

-Harry visited her.

-An hour and a half later she was conscious.

-Harry spent another half hour alone with her.

-Tonks condition began to rapidly improve.

-Dumbledore had confided in confidence that Harry also had morphing ability.

-Tonks had been coaching Harry in skill development and she knew that they were close.

At the time that Harry had visited her, Tonks' liver and kidneys were shutting down and brain function had all but stopped. According to Crabtree, she had been expected to die that evening. As it was now, Tonks would be released from St. Mungo's in no more than a week or two.

Poppy wondered if it was spontaneous, or if Harry had consciously done something to help her. Knowing that Harry was intrinsically a very private person, she decided to proceed with caution. She did not want to strain the good working relationship that they shared. She asked Harry to come and see her that evening after dinner. Harry had no clue of her intended topic.

He walked into the hospital wing and found her working with one of the practice mannequins. She demonstrated that Tonks had effectively bled out. A woman of her size and weight had about eight pints of blood in her body, and blood pressure would have dropped nearly to zero with the loss of five pints. She measured five pints of water and poured them onto the floor making a puddle about the size that Harry had seen on his garage floor a week ago.

“So you can see that Tonks mostly had potion running through her veins at the time she was portkeyed to St. Mungo's.” Harry nodded. Poppy continued. “Harry, Healer Crabtree said that you told her that Tonks’ heart stopped at two AM. How did you know?”

Harry replied, “Tonks more or less adopted me as her younger brother over the summer. I had a vision or dream of her at that time, and then woke up.”

“OK. So the next day she was in grave condition by the time you went to see her. Please tell me what happened.”

Harry stammered his way into an explanation. He was obviously embarrassed about something. Poppy didn’t want to ruin the moment, but really wanted to know what happened. She led him to one of the adult female mannequins and asked him to show her what he’d done. Harry climbed on top of the table and held the mannequin to him.

She asked, “Harry, are you sure that’s exactly the way that you were doing it?” Red faced Harry moved his hand to the mannequin’s breast and told her that he’d held her like that for nearly an hour. Realizing that the young man was extremely embarrassed, she went to her office and found him a butterbeer, and had a pumpkin juice herself.

“Harry, how did you feel when Dumbledore got there?”

"I was tired. I remember that he noticed and made a portkey for me to use to get home with. I went back home and took a nap for an hour or so."

"Harry, according to Healer Crabtree, Tonks should have been buried today. How do you think she got better?"

"I dunno. I just felt her arm. It seemed so cold. I just tried to warm her up a bit. I didn't mean to grope her or anything."

She smiled at him. "Whatever you did, I'm certain was done with honorable intentions." With an absolutely straight face, she said, "I'm certain that she wouldn't have minded under any circumstances. Were you thinking about anything special as you were holding her?"

Harry thought about her question for a few minutes before answering, "I just wanted her to warm up and wake up. I didn't really think about anything else except how worried I was about her."

"Harry, I'm not trying to pry into your personal life, but have you ever been intimate with Tonks?"

Beet red, Harry asked, "Please be specific. What exactly are you asking? We've never made love if that's what you're referring to."

"She smiled at him. "That's specifically what I was asking about. From the way that you qualified your answer, I'm speculating that the two of you have a close relationship. Is that a fair statement?"

"Madam Pomfrey, like I said, Tonks is my unofficially adopted big sister. As such, I love her very much. We've had our clothes off together in regards to practicing morphing. Did I answer your question?" His face looked like a boiled lobster.

"Yes. You did fine." She gave him a little hug. "Again Harry, I didn't mean to embarrass you. This conversation will never go any further, I promise you." Harry nodded. She asked, "Can I ask you a few more questions?"

“Sure.”

“Harry, injuries or alcohol related incidents aside, when was the last time that you were sick?”

“I dunno. I don’t remember being sick.”

She nodded. “Harry, one last question. Have you ever held another girl like you held Tonks?”

“Only Ginny.”

“OK. Thank you Harry, I appreciate the candidness of your answers. Again, this conversation won’t go any further. Goodnight Harry.”

“Goodnight, Madam Pomfrey.”

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Further testing indicated that Harry did indeed possess an ability to heal those that he loved. Pomfrey kept her word about Harry holding Tonks. As with most of his abilities, Dumbledore recommended that Harry did not disclose the information to anyone who did not need to know.

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Harry remembered the joy that he’d felt when the other Apprentices arrived the next day. They had grown so close that being apart was almost painful. They selected their rooms and quickly settled in. They organized their study area, and helped Harry organize the space for his classroom. Dumbledore had found Harry a spare classroom. Hermione had transfigured floor mats almost identical to the ones that Harry had purchased for his own training room. The only thing missing in it was a weight training set. On the last day before the students arrived, the teens took a trip to Harrods. Harry purchased a set identical to what they had. Hermione shrunk the boxes and charmed them to be feather light. They had lunch in a local pub, apparated back to school, and set up the equipment.

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Harry's first week of school was quite a bit different than the previous years. Dumbledore had asked the apprentices to sit at the staff table for the welcoming feast wearing their gray robes. After the sorting ceremony and the meal, he stood up and addressed the students.

"Now that you are all fed and watered, I have a few announcements. The forbidden forest remains that – forbidden to students. Indeed, there are a few creatures in there that don't take kindly to unannounced visits." There were smiles from some of the older Gryffindors at these words. He continued. "You can read the list of items that Mr. Filch has added to his list of forbidden objects. It would seem that he has been spending much of his holiday visiting the Weasley brothers marvelous shop." There was laughter and a bit of applause at those remarks. Looking over, Harry saw Filch scowl as if his world had come to an end. Filch felt that punishment was the best response to 99 percent of the student's activities.

Dumbledore continued. "On a more serious note, many of you are probably aware that Voldemort has been active in the fifteen months since he has returned. In that time he had corrupted people, destroyed homes, directly and indirectly murdered people. This summer Voldemort and his Death Eaters murdered two of our own students. Please raise your glass in remembrance of Miss Luna Lovegood and Mr. Ron Weasley."

As the school had done with Cedric Diggory, the students and the staff rose and as one said, "To Luna Lovegood, and to Ron Weasley."

Dumbledore continued. "Twelve of our former students were also lost this summer to Voldemort and his Death Eaters." He named the names of the Aurors and Hit Wizards who had been lost in the July raid at the Grangers.

There was absolute silence in the hall as he'd spoken those words. After a moment, he continued. "The tally is not entirely one sided. As school was ending last year, eleven Death Eaters were captured. In July another Death Eater had been captured. In the month of August, five Death Eaters were captured. During that time another eleven

sacrificed their lives serving Voldemort's dark cause." There was a solid round of applause at this news. Most of the students were unaware of the numbers, as they had only been vaguely reported in the Daily Prophet.

He continued. "The need to be versed in the defense against the dark arts cannot be overstated. As such, the board of school governors has allowed me to provide you with what I believe is the strongest team of defense instructors offered during your lifetime." There was another solid round of applause. "Leading our defense teaching effort this year will be retired Master Auror, Professor Moody. Professor Moody was impersonated two years ago, and the real Moody has agreed to teach the third through seventh year defense classes." There was a mixture of polite and enthusiastic applause. Moody simply looked too intimidating to warm up to.

Dumbledore began again. "Serving in the role of Instructor for the first and second year defense classes this year is a man who had been battling the dark forces his entire life. He was directly or indirectly involved in apprehending many of the Death Eaters that I previously mentioned. He has agreed to provide an outstanding foundation for our first and second year students. I am of course referring to our very own – Harry Potter."

The hall erupted with cheering and applause. Dumbledore stood with the other staff as they welcomed Harry and Alastor. After a minute Dumbledore resumed. "In potions, replacing Severus Snape is another exceptional Instructor who I'm certain will excel here. I would like to introduce you to Professor Daily. Professor Daily has had a successful career in potions research at St. Mungo's. I believe she will be an outstanding addition. She will also be serving as head of Slytherin house."

While not at the level of the announcement of Harry's appointment, the announcement that the students wouldn't have to spend another minute in class with Snape was met with widespread approval. Hermione and Susan noticed that the announcements were equally well received by each of the houses. Finally Dumbledore mentioned that he had taken on four apprentices and indicated that they would be spending the majority of their time away from the other students.



Looking around, Neville noticed that the sixth year Slytherins were effectively gone from the school. He looked around at the other tables and noticed that Marietta was gone too. Between the loss of Snape, the Slytherins, Umbridge and the addition of Moody, Harry and Professor Daily, it was looking to be a kinder, gentler school.

It turned out that Neville was at least half right. It was a kinder school as evidenced by the first week. He hadn't lost a house point or been insulted once. Neville was taking Herbology and Potions with the idea of doing medical research as a career. McGonagall had personally introduced him to Professor Daily, identifying him as a high potential student. Five minutes of discussion led the two to realize that they had much in common, even if from different perspectives. Potions quickly became one of his favorite classes. Whether the school would prove to be gentler to those still advocating the dark arts remained to be seen.

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## Chapter 2

The four apprentices quickly adjusted to their own schedules. They had enough classes in common to continue to strengthen their bond, yet enough was different to give each of them some personal space. They worked into the routine of having lunch with their respective houses and alternating having dinner at the staff table one week and in their living space the next.

Hermione was progressing rapidly with her Ancient Runes and Arithmancy work. She had come to enjoy working at her own pace, rather than that of a large class, and would get through the sixth year material by mid October.

All of them were helping Ginny who effectively had skipped fifth year. She was doing a lot of extra study in preparation for taking her OWLs in six weeks.

Susan was doing well in her Advanced Herbology work - actually better since she was focusing on the healing aspects of Potions and Herbology. Her work on Mental Defenses with Harry had the extra benefit of each of them having someone to practice with. Dumbledore was teaching them both Occlumency and Legilimency at the same time.

On the first Saturday after school started, the four decided to visit Diagon Alley in the morning. The women had some extra shopping to do and Harry was anxious to visit Tonks. They agreed to meet in the apothecary in two hours. Harry found his way to Tonks' room. Teresa McKinney, the Auror who Harry had met the first time was still sitting there. She beamed at Harry and asked him to wait a few minutes so she could tell Tonks that she had a visitor.

After five minutes, she came out and Harry went in. Tonks had a big smile on her face and was obviously glad to see Harry. "Hi loverboy. I've missed you."

"Hi Sis. I've missed you too. I've been really worried about you. Are you OK?"

“Thanks Harry. I’m a lot better.” She scooted over to the edge of the little bed, still hooked up to an intravenous potions bottle. “Please sit by me Harry.” He removed his Dr. Martins and sat on the other side next to Tonks. He noticed that she was wearing the diamond studs that he had given her. “The Head Healer said that I can leave in a few more days. I can go back to work in another week after that. It’s been nice having a chance to catch up on my reading, but I’m about done with everything. How’s school going? Are your students learning anything?”

Harry broke into a smile. It was obvious that he really loved teaching. “I’m going to have three units in class – Recognizing dangerous situations, getting out of those situations and reacting to them if you can’t get away. So we’ll cover agility, casting accuracy, being alert, proper wand handling and that sort of stuff. We don’t want anyone losing a buttock, do we?” They both laughed, remembering Moody’s tirade from several years ago. “I’m picking up six dozen leather wrist wand holsters to give out in class, as well as some sweets for affirmations. Actually with the DA group starting up again tomorrow, I think I’ll pick up a gross of them.”

“Harry, that’s a really great thing for you to do. You should pick up the adjustable leather kind. The smallest kids can use them as an ankle holster. I wish I’d had someone like you to start me off right in defense. Your students are really fortunate. On a different subject, how’s the morphing coming along?”

“In truth, I haven’t practiced much. Maybe you could come up and help me for a bit.”

Tonks couldn’t resist the opportunity to tease Harry. “Sure...You just want another opportunity to see me in or out of my knickers. Just teasing Li’l bro. I don’t think I’ll be up to apparating for another few weeks, but I could take the Knight Bus.”

Harry looked at her and smiled. “Stan and Ernie would like that. Be gentle on them.”

“Thanks for coming to see me today Harry. You really brightened my day. I hope I can return the favor sometime.” She leaned over and

gave Harry a very friendly hug. Harry was left with no doubt in his mind that she wasn't wearing anything under her hospital gown. He kissed her on the forehead and scooted off of the little bed.

He met the three girls at the apothecary. Susan had found several bags of potions ingredients that Professor Daily had suggested that they each get, as well as some things that she needed for her healing work. They went to the shop where Harry had purchased their dragonhide armor. Harry explained what he needed and the shopkeeper said she'd have them delivered the next morning. Harry paid her, and the four teens left to have lunch.

They left Diagon Alley and found a fish and chips stand on the next street. Ginny ordered for them and they found a table to sit at. As they were finishing, Harry's scar began to twinge. He had them find an alleyway where they could apparate back to Hogsmede station. As they were walking back to the castle, Harry felt a blinding pain in his head. The three witches each held him for a minute until the pain passed. They ran the rest of the way back to the castle to find Dumbledore, only to learn that he'd just left.

Dumbledore returned that evening with disturbing news. Azkaban fortress had been broken into and effectively emptied as a prison. At the time, there were sixteen prisoners being held there. Equally disturbing, the dementors had vanished, apparently having abandoned their posts en masse. Harry asked who the prisoners were. Dumbledore mentioned that the only ones he might be familiar with were Dolohov, Macnair and Narcissa Malfoy. The others had been in the Ministry holding cells at the time of the breakout.

"Voldemort probably didn't get the prisoners that he was looking for," commented Harry.

"He may not have Harry, but don't make the mistake of underestimating Dolohov or Belatrix's sister. They both are accomplished killers. Lucius was a dangerous Death Eater, not so much for the violence that he personally could do, rather because he maintained a degree of respectability within the Wizarding community. He could operate within the visible circles, consorting with Ministry

officials during the daytime and with the other Death Eaters at night. Certainly his influence on Fudge cost lives. Narcissa was recently imprisoned for illegal currency transfer, most likely transferring funds from the deceased Death Eater's accounts. I wasn't involved in her trial." Dumbledore appeared reflective for a moment and asked, "Harry have you had any visions from Riddle lately?"

Harry replied, "No. Since working on Occlumency, I haven't seen a thing. My scar twitches from time to time, but the last time I saw anything was the night that he torched the street in Yorkshire."

A wide smile appeared on Dumbledore's face. "Excellent Harry. I believe that indicates that you have truly learned to keep him out of your mind. I'm very pleased with your progress. Strategically, we should change the focus of your mental defense class to implanting false memories and Legilimency, so you can go after Riddle when you are ready." He got up to end the meeting. "Please enjoy the rest of your evening Harry"

"Thank you Professor. You too."

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Harry returned to his room. The women were there spending time helping each other with their hair. They didn't immediately notice Harry's arrival as they were also listening to the WWN. Harry loved the castle, but at that moment missed his home with the leather sofas and DVDs on the television.

Ginny saw Harry walk into the bathroom to shower. She transfigured some napkins into four extra squashy sleeping bags and another four napkins into fluffy pillows. She knocked on his door and asked him to come out. A moment later he walked out. They sat him down on the chair by the fireplace and dried his hair. Susan asked him to lay down on the sleeping bags that they'd set out by the fireplace. She worked on massaging his feet while Ginny did his arms and shoulders.

They talked while they were working on him. Harry told them about the Azkaban breakout and the defection of the dementors. Hermione

suggested that he have everyone work on the Patronus charm the next day in the DA meeting.

Ginny turned down the lamps so the only light was coming from the fireplace. She'd charmed the door shut and came back to the sleeping bags. The four of them curled up together by the fire. Harry had his arm around Ginny, Hermione had her arm around Harry, while Susan was "sleeping" by the three of them. Harry was enjoying holding Ginny, who obviously was enjoying what he was doing. After ten minutes, she shocked Harry by telling him to roll over to his other side. The three of them each changed sides with Ginny holding Harry, Harry holding Hermione while Susan giggled at the embarrassed look on his face.

Harry woke up early the next morning. He untangled himself from Susan, Hermione and Ginny and walked into the bathroom. He was shocked to notice that his hair was nearly to his shoulders! He wondered if it had been that way all evening, or just gotten that way.

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Harry really came to appreciate the time that they were spending with Flitwick. Monday evenings they spent going over different charms. He took the time to explain not only the charm itself but the various situations where he'd seen them used.

Harry watched the class not only from the perspective of a student, but also that of an Instructor. In terms of actual teaching technique, Harry felt that Flitwick was head and shoulders above the other Instructors that he'd had. Tonight's lesson was on the use of a staff for casting a staff with additional power. Flitwick had created a staff for his own use many years ago. His was made of unicorn tail hair as a core, similar to his own wand, but 38 inches long, or about head high in his case.

He demonstrated using a Reducto charm on a stump of wood. It split the stump into several pieces. Using the staff on another stump caused it to explode! He had Hermione and Susan try it. Each could split a stump with a try or two. Ginny tried, and surprisingly (to

Hermione anyway) split her stump on the first try. Harry tried last. Surprising no one, his stump shattered into a hundred pieces.

“Cor blimey,” said Ginny. “Oh, sorry,” she said catching herself. “Harry, how did you do that?”

“The same as you I suppose. I think it had as much to do with position as power. I tried to hit the center of the stump. Does that make sense? Hermione, try yours again.” She did, and this time it split neatly in two. She beamed at him.

“Good one. Susan, try again.” She did, and hers broke in several pieces.

Flitwick noted the wood that each used for their wands as well as the core. He told them he’d contact Ollivander for the supplies to make the staffs with. He’d get several feathers from Fawkes if it was alright with Dumbledore.

Harry told them the experience that he’d had in the graveyard against his brother wand. Flitwick believed that enough time had passed where Harry’s staff and Voldemort’s wand would not be seen as brother wands, as a phoenix would age and change slightly over time. Harry’s wand was about sixty years old when he bought it. Fawkes was a young bird at the time.

Susan asked, “Professor, what else will we need?”

Flitwick answered, “You’ll need your wood, the core material and two ounces of your own blood. The blood magically seals the halves of the wood back together after you have placed the core material in them. Then you can carve or smooth the wood to get the exact shape that you desire. Some witches or wizards place a rune or two on the end. We can talk more about that later.”

Harry thought about the lesson he’d just had. It demonstrated the difference in power of a well placed spell. He would bring it up at the next DA meeting. When they got back to their common room, Susan commented that it would be awesome to have a staff. The others

agreed. Hermione volunteered to go to the library to see if there was a book on staff making. She left to go check.

Susan sat on the sofa by Harry and quietly asked, "Harry, can I ask you a personal question?"

"Of course. What's up?"

"What happened with your hair last night? It was as long as mine. Now it's your regular length. How did you do it?"

Harry didn't want to lie to Susan. He told her, "Tonks has been working with me on that all summer. I can change the length and color pretty easily now. Tonks was working with me to change my eye color too, but that's really hard. It's supposed to be a secret. Please don't mention it to anyone outside of this room."

"I won't Harry. I promise." She looked at him for a moment, took a steadying breath and asked, "Harry, sometime could you hold me at night? Sometimes I get kind of lonely too."

"You wouldn't mind?"

"No. Hermione doesn't either."

"But Ginny and I are..."

"We know. We just want to be with you too. Ginny doesn't mind."

"Oh. I'm confused."

"We know. We aren't. It's OK."

"Oh."

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Harry's second class with the first years was a lot of fun. He conjured up a large basket with about a hundred tennis balls, and passed them out to the class. He asked one of the girls, Hanna Smith to stand



about twenty feet away from him. She had five tennis balls. Harry asked her to throw them at him, one at a time. Five times she either missed him, or he ducked when her aim had been true. Harry asked her to pick four other students and had them each throw at the same time. Several times they came close, but still there were no hits. Finally he had the entire class throw at him at the same time. To the class's delight, Harry was pelted and hit about a half dozen times.

As the students were gathering up the tennis balls, Harry asked them to think about why he wasn't hit the first two times, but was on the third time. Hanna said, "It was a lot easier for you to dodge one person attacking you than it was five people. You couldn't dodge twenty-two of us even though you're really good."

"Exactly. Two points to Hufflepuff." I hope that you learned two important lessons today. You should always dodge or get away from someone that is attacking you if you can. Second, if enough of you attack, you can hit almost anyone. For next time, please bring the wand holsters that I gave you, and we'll practice aiming. Please read chapter two out of your book. Have a good week."

"Thank you, Professor Potter," they all said in unison.

"You're very welcome. Thank you for allowing me to show you those things." After the students left, Harry turned and said, "OK Remus, you can come out now."

Sheepishly, Remus pulled off Harry's cloak. "How did you know I was there?" he asked.

Harry smiled at his friend. "You didn't follow your own advice and shuffled your feet once as you moved along ten minutes ago. I knew it wasn't Dumbledore because I saw him walk by the hallway, and Moody sounds different with his wooden leg. How are you? It's great to see you."

Remus looked tired. It could have been the moon, but Harry sensed that it was stress. Remus said, "I'm OK. I've been doing a lot of work for the Order, trying to track down Narcissa. Dumbledore thinks she's going to try to move some funds from some of the imprisoned Death

Eater accounts. We want to try to prevent that if we can. Enough news about me. Obviously your teaching is going well. How are your own lessons going?"

Harry nodded, "I'm learning new things, and re-learning how to use existing skills in new ways. From my perspective, that's almost more valuable." They walked back to the Apprentice common room. Winky popped in, with a tray of sandwiches and six butterbeers. After they ate for a minute, Harry said, "Remus, can I ask you something?"

"Anything Harry. Anything."

"How many friends did you lose in the first war?"

Remus looked sadly at his friend. "I'm not sure if that's a fair question if you're trying to make a comparison. From one perspective, I lost all of them. From another, I had so few real friends, that it was only a handful. Ask the question differently."

Harry thought for a moment and said, "Sometimes I'm scared that I'll be the only one left standing."

Remus wasn't expecting that. After a moment, he said, "I understand what you're trying to say. Come here Cub." Remus gave Harry a hug. "Harry, remember last Christmas when Moody showed you the picture of the Order from the first war? There were about twenty-five people in the photo. Dumbledore, myself, Arabella, Molly, Arthur, Fletcher, Poppy and Sirius were the only ones still alive this last Christmas. Susan's parents were killed, as were your own. Neville's were lost. "You remember him telling you the individual circumstances of the others. That was just people from the Order. A lot of people that I knew of from school had been killed, or their parents, or siblings. Sometimes they were just killed for sport, sometimes tortured, sometimes they were just caught in the crossfire. Dan and Emma Granger got lucky. Molly and Arthur may have been the targets last month, but your friends Ron and Luna got killed instead. No one targeted Luna. She simply was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Her father couldn't stand the loss and killed himself."

There were tears in both wizards' eyes. "Yes Harry, it hurts. It hurt to lose Gary and Florence Bones. They were friends of Lilly's from school. They'd started a wizardwear shop. They were killed one afternoon when their shop was blown up. Amelia is Gary's Aunt. She took Susan in, much like Petunia did, except she loved..." There were tears in his eyes. Harry nodded in understanding.

After a moment Remus continued, "You probably know about Frank and Alice. Little Neville sat and watched them get tortured for hours. He was obliviated and they may never get better. The McKinnon's were most likely killed by the Malfoys. Bellatrix killed the Pruitts. Voldemort killed Sirius' brother Regulus for having second thoughts about becoming a Death Eater." Harry handed him another butterbeer.

Remus continued, "I guess part of the problem last time was that the score was so one sided. They probably killed nearly a hundred witches and wizards, and I'd hate to guess how many muggles, say another hundred or two, so the score was like 300 to 10. Alastor tracked down a few, but we were getting flattened. Then that night your parents were killed, it all stopped. Neville's parents were the final victims for over a dozen years."

He finished, "The Malfoys spread a bunch of gold around and gave out the story that half of the Death Eaters had been under the Imperius curse, and should be held blameless for their crimes." Remus looked around for a moment, got a worried look on his face, and asked, "Harry, who else is in here?"

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## Chapter 3

“OK Ginny and Susan, it’s time to show yourselves.”

The girls took the disillusionment spells off of each other and said, “Hi Remus. What’s new?”

Slightly embarrassed, and knowing that he would hear from Moody about Constant vigilance, he recovered by offering the witches a butterbeer. “Congratulations. Your stealth lessons seem to be going well. Harry did you know that we had company?”

Harry smiled at Susan and Ginny. “Yup. Ginny scratches her ear from time to time, and Susan’s nose twitched a few times. Otherwise they were pretty much silent for the whole hour. They came in when Winky had brought the sandwiches. I shuffled a book or two to cover the noise of their footsteps.”

Remus looked impressed. “Well done. I see that you all work very well together. I need to visit with Dumbledore for a few minutes before your afternoon lesson. It was good to finally see you again. Say hi to Hermione for me.”

“Say hi yourself,” giggled Susan. “She’s right over there.” She walked to the corner by the bookcase and tapped their brilliant friend on the forehead to make her reappear.

“Hi Remus,” said Hermione, obviously pleased with herself.

“Hello Hermione. Your parents send their greetings. They’re doing well, as are yours Ginny. I’ll see you later.”

“Bye Remus,” they all said together. After he left, they all gave each other a group hug. It had been a hard conversation for all of them.

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A week before Halloween, Dumbledore visited the teens after their evening lesson. Softly knocking on their door and entering when asked, he walked in. “Good evening. I wanted to talk with you

regarding your progress and the examinations. First, I believe that each of you are making outstanding progress and are to be commended. Miss Granger, I have personally examined your work in Ancient Runes and Arithmancy and have found it to be exceptional." She beamed at him. "Miss Bones, your work in Herbology and Potions has been remarkable." A tear welled in her eye. Dumbledore had rarely complimented her work in front of people that she really cared about. It felt fantastic. Dumbledore continued, "Miss Weasley, you too have proven yourself to be an outstanding witch. I am proud of all of you." They all smiled at him. Dumbledore was not exceptionally generous with praise directly to students and hearing it meant a lot to them.

He continued. "That said, Miss Weasley, which OWL examinations would you care to sit for?"

Ginny replied, "Defense, Charms, Transfiguration, Arithmancy, Potions, Muggle Studies, Care of Magical Creatures and Ancient Runes Professor."

Dumbledore was slightly surprised. "If my recollection is correct, you never took Muggle Studies or Runes."

Ginny gave him a determined look. "I have been extensively tutored in both topics Professor." She glanced at Hermione and Harry, who both nodded at her.

Dumbledore replied, "Yes, I expect that you have. Looking over at Susan and Hermione, he asked, "Are the three of you ready for your NEWT Examinations in Defense, Charms and Transfiguration?"

"They replied, "Yes Professor."

He nodded. "Excellent. You will be able to sit for any of the others in the spring. As such, we will cancel your regular classes for the week and begin on Monday. I have contacted the examiners. Miss Weasley, you will take Arithmancy and Muggle Studies on Monday, Care of Magical Creatures and Runes on Tuesday. Each of you will take Defense on Wednesday, Charms on Thursday, and Transfiguration on Friday."

He continued. "Harry, Alastor has offered to take your classes for you on Monday and Tuesday if you wish to have the extra time to study."

Harry replied, "No, but thank you Professor. I like working with the students."

Dumbledore smiled. "I thought as much. They very obviously like working with you as well. Miss Weasley, the examinations on Monday and Tuesday will be held in the reception room off of the Great Hall. The examinations on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday for all of you will be held in Mr. Potter's classroom." They each nodded at him.

He continued. "On a different topic, you may have heard that there is a Hogsmede visit scheduled for the students next Saturday. I was hoping that the four of you would be willing to go and keep watch on the students. I have also asked Kingsley and Remus to go. Would that be acceptable?"

"Of course Professor," said Hermione with the others nodding in agreement.

Harry asked, "Professor, are you expecting trouble?"

Dumbledore looked at Harry and said, "Quite honestly, I'd be surprised if nothing happened. You may wish to bring your staffs with you if they are finished. After the students return to the school, perhaps you could try them out." Looking at his pocket watch, he said, "I didn't mean to stay so long. Please have a wonderful weekend."

"You too, Professor."

-----

Objectively, the teens were nearly at NEWT level in Charms, Transfiguration, and Defense by the end of the summer, and had only been accelerating the rate of their study since. Each of them in turn, took time to help Ginny. Hermione worked with her an hour each on Runes and Arithmancy, while Susan helped her with Potions and

Herbology. Harry helped her with Charms, Care of Magical Creatures and Transfiguration.

Monday and Tuesday went by quickly. Harry was quite glad to be teaching his Defense class. He'd conjured a hundred balloons and asked the class to shoot sparks at them to improve their accuracy. After about half of the balloons had been popped, Harry charmed the air so there was a light breeze and the balloons were moving. Everyone in the class was nearly even with Hanna getting the most at eight, while everyone got at least three each.

In the second year, Harry did more or less the same exercise, except that the students also had to dodge tennis balls that Harry tossed at them. Harry was pleased that no one had allowed themselves to be hit with a tennis ball.

They were eating dinners at the staff table that week. Harry generally sat by Professor Flitwick. They really seemed to enjoy each other's company and found that they had a lot of common interests. Other times he sat by Poppy. They'd grown quite comfortable with each other after the Tonks discussion.

Hermione tended to sit by McGonagall, who was glad that the young woman who she viewed as a protégé had been offered the opportunity at an accelerated program. Just as Harry was enjoying his teaching work, Minerva was positively thrilled to be in a position to be challenged on a weekly basis by the four. Hermione had such obvious talent in the subject. Minerva prayed each evening that the young witch would survive the war.

Ginny tended to alternate – sometimes sitting by Hagrid, sometimes by Sprout and Susan. Most frequently, she sat by professor Daily, delighting each other with stories about dragons, professional Quidditch, or kangaroos.

Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday passed fairly quickly. Each was certain that they'd received top marks on Defense on Wednesday. The OWL level examination was a demonstration of skills. The NEWT examination was similar, but also had a one on one duel, which they each won easily.

Charms was perhaps the easiest examination of the week. They'd all received bonus points for each having fabricated a working staff. Transfiguration was perhaps the hardest subject. Several of the examples that the examiner had asked to see were things that Harry had never tried before. By chance, he was also asked to transfigure some sand into marble, and did that perfectly. They each received more than a few bonus points for their skill at conjuring objects. After they'd finished, they were told that they would receive their results that Sunday evening.

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Friday they'd invited some of the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs over for the evening. Neville, Shamus, Lavender, Parvati, Ernie, Justin, Hanna, and Michael arrived at seven. The Apprentices had been careful to put away any of the controversial items which they had such as their staffs, swords, and other weapons, as well as their armor.

Winky had made snacks and several deserts for them. Dobby had brought several cases of cold butterbeers, lemonade, and flavored tea. Neville spent much of the evening quietly talking with Harry. He asked Harry if he knew what had happened with Umbridge and Bellatrix. Harry knew that Neville had the right to know, and told him what had happened, as well as the truth about how Ron and Luna had been murdered.

School was going quite well for Neville this year. It seemed that the removal of Snape and a few of the Slytherins had made a huge change in his confidence. He was doing very well in potions, well in defense, and of course continued to excel in Herbology. His only concern at the moment was his Gran's failing health.

At ten minutes to ten, Hermione suggested that it was time for the others to get going so they'd get to their common rooms by ten PM.

After they left, Susan mentioned that it was nice to spend time with their school friends again. Laying out the sleeping bags, Ginny commented that it was nice to see them, but better to be here.



Harry opened up four butterbeers and handed one to each of them. Hermione, noticed the changed look on his face and asked, "What's wrong Harry?"

"I'm worried about tomorrow. Voldemort could attack, the dementors could come, a dozen Death Eaters could grab some of the students, or any combination could take place."

Susan said, "I wouldn't be surprised to see a dozen of the Aurors there as well."

They sat there for ten minutes in comfortable silence. Ginny collected the bottles, while the other witches put on their nighties. Ginny turned down the lights, and the dancing flames from the fireplace illuminated them. "Good night Harry," they said.

"Goodnight angels."

-----

Hermione woke up first. She had come to enjoy the weekend slumber parties, as she referred to them. As it turned out, Harry'd had his arms around her for a good part of the evening. It was like magic. Her stresses seemed to melt away and the world was at peace when he was with her. She even felt better. Looking over she saw that he was curled up next to Susan now with Ginny behind him. The level of trust among the four was incredible.

Whether it was love, trust, friendship, or something else, she couldn't tell. The adjectives seemed to melt together. If her parents asked her about Harry using any of them, she would have answered yes. After showering, she slipped on a pair of red silk knickers. Looking at herself in the bathroom mirror, she was quite satisfied with her looks. She seemed to be a bit bustier than she'd been last year, surprising herself given all of the exercise and physical training that they'd had. In reality, she knew that she was quite strong for a young woman, and exceptionally so for a witch. Few if any of the young witches at Hogwarts outside their group had even considered physical training as a worthwhile activity.

Her dragonhide vest went on after her bra. One reality of the fire at her parents' home was that she had a lot of nicer new intimate wear. She smiled, considering that Harry'd gotten those things for her.

Smiling at her Mum's mistaken concern that she'd gone Goth, she looked at herself in the mirror. Wearing only a dark green dragonhide vest and red knickers, she looked like a heroine from one of the fantasy novels that she's seen at Harrods. She smiled as she put on the matching pants. They fit very well. In one of his rare randy moments, Harry'd probably think that they looked like she'd been poured into them. In spite of being tight, they offered remarkable freedom of movement.

Looking over at the fireplace, Susan seemed to be melting under Harry's handwork. She was certain that he was asleep, and equally positive that Susan was wide-awake enjoying the experience. Contrasting the years of nightmares that he'd had to endure, she couldn't be happier for him. He really was her best friend.

She saw Ginny nuzzle and kiss the back of his neck before getting up herself. Moving over to let the athletic redhead into the shower, Hermione finished drying her hair. With Susan and Ginny's help, it was less fly-away frizzy this year, and much more accurately described as thick and healthy. Hermione glanced as Ginny got out of the shower while she was brushing her teeth. Ginny was beautiful. Five foot four, thin, slightly busty with the flattest stomach that Hermione'd ever seen, her auburn haired, adopted sister was gorgeous. Noticing that Hermione was looking at her strangely, she asked, "What?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "Nothing. I was just thinking how happy I am to be here with the rest of you."

"Me too. Now budge over so I can fix myself up and look half as good as you do."

Hermione looked up, surprised at her words.

Ginny repeated, "Scoot. See if Winky can bring us some toast, tea, coffee and a diet coke for Susan."

POP. A minute later, Winky had arrived with everything that Ginny had thought about. The others were already up. Harry knew that he'd never see the inside of the bathroom for at least half an hour, and went to his room to get his things. He hoped that the fog they'd seen last night would lift. He began his routine of sit-ups, stretching exercises and pushups.

In the meantime, Susan had found her way into the shower. Like the others she'd gotten up well rested, even if she hadn't gotten a lot of sleep. Talk about magic hands. Like the others she'd never trade her apprenticeship back for the traditional curriculum. In all likelihood, she'd already earned three NEWT certifications only four months into the program. She felt so lucky to be here. She liked the program, liked being really close to the other witches and Harry. More than having the best friends of her life, she felt that she'd started to make a difference in the world. Helping bring down Umbridge was a lot more important than finding out what was in Ernie's pants like Hanna had seemed so intent on learning the night before.

She opened the Harrods box that she'd received on Tuesday evening. It contained an assortment of silk sleepwear, bras, and knickers. Each item was gorgeous, and they fit perfectly. Harry'd never said a word, but knew that she'd seen similar items on the other witches and longed for the same. She smiled to herself. He took such good care of each of them.

A soft pounding on the bathroom door got her attention. "Come on Susan. It's been twenty minutes. Give a guy a break, will you?"

Susan walked out, wearing only her form-fitting dragonhide pants. She smiled at him, and said, "With pleasure, Mr. Potter, with pleasure."

Dumfounded, Harry walked into the bathroom carrying his armful of clothing and closed the door behind him. Confronted with the evidence, Harry realized that the summer had been very kind to Susan. She'd lost inches in her middle and kept them in the – well,

she'd lost some weight, was stronger, a lot more agile and had a fantastic smile. He felt as lucky to know her as he did with Hermione and Ginny. They'd taken great care of each other, and were working as a great team.

He used the toilet, showered, and brushed his teeth before going back to his room. He knew the witches weren't done yet and he could stand in front of his bedroom mirror just as easily as the one in the bathroom. His thoughts went to Tonks for a moment, remembering the two of them standing in front of the mirror together. He hoped to see her again in the next week, and wished that she was all right.

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If someone wanted to attack the village of Hogsmede, there were several possible strategies. There was apparating into the center of the village, hurting a few people and leaving. Three or four people could do it and be gone in about thirty seconds. Without a large force of light-side witches and wizards defending the village, it would be a difficult attack to defend against. Fortunately, it did not seem like a strategy that Riddle's Death Eaters had frequently elected to use.

Harry was more concerned about an actual attack on the town. Hogsmede was a village of about a thousand inhabitants. Most of the villagers lived within a mile of the Three Broomsticks Pub. Half of them lived either in the four row houses, above the shops or in the cottages that surrounded the village. The others lived a bit farther away, mostly to the south or west. Some worked in London, while most did something in the village. Commute time really wasn't a consideration for an adult witch or wizard, so the idea of travel time as the muggles measured it really didn't exist in the wizarding world. As many of the residents would be gone visiting friends this Halloween weekend as would be home. For the shopkeepers, it was a big shopping day with about 350 eager shoppers descending on the three dozen or so shops for four hours before returning to the castle.

What the villagers didn't know, nor couldn't have known was that ninety or so dementors had staged themselves in the forbidden forest, north west of the castle, far enough from the road connecting the castle and the village to avoid being detected.

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## Chapter 4

At eight, Remus and Kingsley knocked on the door. Kingsley had brought Teresa McKinney, the Auror that Harry had met at St. Mungo's along for the day. Harry went over the plan. Remus and Hermione would be stationed at the north end of the village. Kingsley and Ginny would patrol the south end of the village. Harry and Susan would watch the east side, while Teresa would walk the streets in the center of the village. In the event that they saw trouble, they would send up red sparks and use the Cannon Blast charm to alert the village.

At nine, everyone was in place. Professor Anna Daily, Minerva, and Sprout escorted the students out the door and down the mile and a half road to the village.

McKinney had been surprised and honestly somewhat insulted when Harry had bluntly asked her if she could cast a Patronus charm. The arrogant wanker. He couldn't be more than 15 or 16. The cheek. She had no clue what her friend Tonks saw in him. He wasn't that handsome, like Kingsley. Going around acting like he was in charge. Rumor had it that he was dating Director Bone's Grand Niece, and all of a sudden it's kiss-up time. Cor, she was a fourth year Auror. Now she was stuck on her day off watching a bunch of school kids go to a candy store. Besides it was freezing out here.

At ten, the students started filtering in to town in little packs. Some went to the candy shop, some to Gladrags, some to the book shop, while a few tried to sneak into the Hogs Head pub. She knew that school legend had it that the proprietor would serve under aged kids hard liquor. McKinney watched a half dozen of the older boys go in. She'd give them five minutes and go have a look. Nothing was happening out here. It was too foggy and chilly out. Come to think of it, she thought that it was even colder now than an hour ago.

She walked into the pub and the old bartender gave her an appraising look. Looks like the old coot's trying to mentally undress me, the perv. The six boys were sitting at one of the back tables having butterbeers and playing cards. No law against that, she thought. After looking around for another ten minutes, she stepped

out again. Blimey, it's cold, she thought as she walked southward down the street. BANG!!! What the...? A dozen dementors had started to surround her. She ran down the street as fast as she could go, every bad memory that she'd ever had coming to mind. Someone down the road called "Get inside. Now." She heard the magnified voice and ran towards it. She tripped, and everything went fuzzy and then she passed out.

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Remus and Hermione heard the Cannon Blast charm and saw the sparks to the south. They looked around and started moving down the road. A jet of green light flew in the direction of Remus. Hermione saw it first and conjured a slab of marble. The spell hit the slab shattering it. She conjured a second barrier and crouched down behind it. Remus had been hit by several of the pieces and was unconscious. She silently cursed the fog.

She saw shapes move towards her. It looked like they could be Death Eaters, but she couldn't be sure. They could be scared kids. More comfortable with her wand than her untested staff at the moment, she drew it, and quietly tried to revive Remus. He was bleeding, but not badly. The Death Eaters were about thirty feet from her when she stuck out her head to the side and quietly muttered, "Stupefy". One went down. A second later she heard a spell hit her barrier. As it hit, she stood and stunned the second Death Eater. She restunned the first one before returning her attention to Lupin.

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Meanwhile Kingsley and Ginny had somehow separated. Kingsley was firing spells at a pair of Death Eaters, while fifty yards away Ginny had been surrounded by dementors. Tom, Tom. I don't know what to do. She cleared her mind and thought of Harry. "Expecto Patronum." An amazing bright fox leapt from her staff and chased the dementors away, at least for the moment.

She saw that Kingsley had his hands full in the street fight that he was in. Having a different angle than he did, she had a pretty clear shot at one of them. She pointed her staff like a rifle and called

“Stupefy.” A huge jet of red light shot from her staff and knocked the Death Eater back nearly thirty feet! The other stood to run away and Kingsley hit him. He gathered their wands and placed one of each of their arms in his anti-apparation manacles.

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Inside the Three Broomsticks it was chaos. Two hundred or so of the students had dashed inside when they heard Harry’s voice. Many were in tears, while others were shouting or talking noisily. “SILENCE.” McGonagall could truly be commanding when she needed to be. “Is anyone badly hurt?” No one was. She quickly used her wand and moved all the furniture to the back wall.

“Please line up by houses and year,” she said. “If anyone can cast a Patronus, please step forward. Absolutely stunning her, a dozen students came forward. “I don’t have time for a wisp of vapor, Longbottom. Please step aside.”

Then she heard him say, “I can do a bear cub.”

Someone else said, “I can do an owl.”

“Mine’s a badger.”

Shamus said, “Mine’s a skinny cat.”

“I can do a Duck.”

“A dog.”

Lavender said, “My form is a bunny, Professor.”

She looked at Shamus. He simply said, “Harry taught us.” The others nodded.

“Right,” she said, embarrassed, but glad. “On the count of three, I’m going to open the door and I want everyone to cast their best Patronus.”



“One, two,” she threw the door open. “Three.”

“Expecto Patronum,” they shouted. A dozen different shapes flew out, and she quickly closed the door again. The different Patronus forms chased the nearby dementors a ways down the street before vanishing.

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Meanwhile, Harry and Susan were in a virtual hurricane of trouble. Susan was casting stunners at anyone who moved, and Harry was casting his Patronus. They were surrounded by forty or fifty dementors. Harry blocked out their magical mind probing. His mind got quiet. The other Death Eaters must have felt them and left the area. Susan was shaking badly. Harry held her and said, “Susan, block them out with Occlumency. We’ll cast a Patronus together. Use your happiest memory and your new staff. On three. One, two three.”

“Expecto Patronum.” A gigantic stag and what would have been a 200 pound beagle leapt from their staffs! They chased the dementors for a moment, and then an amazing thing happened. Susan’s beagle form bit a dementor at the same time that Harry’s form gored it. The foul creature gave an unholy cry and crumpled. Amazed, Harry and Susan cast another and another. Soon there were a dozen empty cloaks on the ground.

In the last seven hundred years, a dementor had not been created or killed, and within the last minute twelve of their number had fallen!!! Sensing their danger, the other dementors fled to the north. Harry and Susan each cast another charm from their staffs, and four more of the foul creatures fell before they were gone.

Sensing that the battle had been lost, the remaining Death Eaters set the outside of the Three Broomsticks on fire, and charmed the doors shut before they apparated away and vanished into the fog.

Harry, Susan, Remus, and Hermione met up outside the flaming building. Remus and Hermione desperately tried to put the fire out. Susan used the Sonorus charm and said, “Get away from the front door.” Harry pointed his staff and cried, “Reducto.” Boom!!! A garage

door sized hole was blown into the front wall!!! Students began running out of the burning building.

Inside several students had been knocked unconscious by the blast. "Get out now," Susan shouted. After a moment, the four ran in and searched the building. "Lumos," called Harry. His staff lit up like a car headlight! Together, they found four students and a badly shaken Madam Rosmerta, then quickly got everyone out of the flaming building.

Dumbledore appeared a moment later and passed out a length of rope, telling all of the students to grab a piece. A moment later, he tapped the rope and they were gone. Dumbledore said, "Harry, if you can please use your remarkable search light for a few more minutes in the fog and check that no one else is nearby. Remus, please evacuate the different shops to the south. I'll check to the north." He gave them each another length of rope to get the remaining students back to the castle with. "Please be back at the castle in ten minutes."

Pop, POP, Pop, Pop, Pop – A dozen Aurors and several Mediwitches appeared, and started searching the area. After a few minutes, Harry and Susan used the portkey with the few students that they'd found and the injured Auror. Several of the teachers conjured a stretcher to take her to the hospital wing.

A minute later Dumbledore had everyone in the Great Hall. He said, "Heads of Houses, please report."

Sprout started, "Hufflepuff is all present and accounted for."

Flitwick said, "Ravenclaw is all present and accounted for."

Daily said, "Slytherin is missing two students."

McGonagall said, "Gryffindor is all present and accounted for."

Ginny said, "The Apprentices are all present."

Dumbledore asked, "Professor Daily, who is missing?"

Daily replied, "Blaise Zabinni and Gary Flint, Professor."

Hermione said, "I stunned them, Professor."

"Thank you, Miss Granger, Hermione. Thank you very much." She could never recall Professor Dumbledore calling her by her first name in front of anyone before.

Dumbledore resumed, "Students, please go to your common rooms and wait there until you are called for. Staff and Apprentices go to Professor Potter's room please." Within two minutes, the students had cleared from the Great hall and were on their way to their rooms.

Dobby and Winky appeared in Harry's classroom. She had brought several pizzas and Dobby brought a case of butterbeers, and several mugs of cocoa. Dumbledore conjured a table and twenty chairs and they sat down.

"Please tell me what happened."

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Gathering the different stories, Dumbledore started to summarize the information. "From Harry's first warning until I portkeyed into town was about five minutes. Assuming that you didn't all see the same ones, we can estimate that there were about a hundred dementors. We can estimate the Death Eaters at between ten and twenty. We believe that there were between four and eight Death Eaters apprehended."

Amelia walked in. Dumbledore started to recap for her. She cut him off. "Please pardon my abruptness, Professor, I need to speak with you and your Apprentices now."

After the others had left the room, Bones sealed the door and pulled a cloak out of a bag that she'd been carrying. "Can anyone explain this?"

Susan said, "Auntie, they were dementors. Harry and I killed some of them when they attacked us."

Hermione started to say, "You can't kill a dementor," but Dumbledore cut her off.

"Please continue, Miss Bones."

"About forty had surrounded us. I about passed out when Harry told me to use Occlumency. He told me to think of my happiest memory, and to use my new staff. We cast a Patronus charm together and they attacked a dementor at the same time. It kind of sizzled and evaporated. I remember that it really stank. We did that three or four more times and they all glided away."

Dumbledore was amazed. Sipping his cocoa, he said, "Remarkable Miss Bones. Please demonstrate your Patronus." Susan cast it and it was a regular sized beagle.

Before anyone could say anything, Harry said, "Wait Professor. Susan come here. Let's do it together like we did out there. 1,2,3. "Expecto Patronum." A giant beagle and the whitest, brightest stag that any of them had ever seen appeared. They leapt from their respective staffs, looked around, walked about the room for a minute and vanished. Everyone's eyes were dazzled from the brightness. Somehow they felt refreshed as the beautiful forms vanished.

Amelia said, "We transported six stunned Death Eaters back to the ministry, and found sixteen of these. Dumbledore does any of this make any sense to you?"

Dumbledore beamed at Harry and replied, "Amelia, I'm positive that everything that your very capable Grand Niece told you was truthful, accurate, and complete. In my rather extensive lifetime, there has not been a recorded death of a dementor. Fortunately, until this year, there has not been a reason to search for one. Now it appears that sixteen of their number have been eliminated. It would appear that the sum of Susan and Harry's efforts far exceeded their individual pieces. Miss Weasley, please stand by Mr. Potter and cast your Patronus charms together. One two three."

"Expecto Patronum." A gigantic owl and another large stag appeared.

“Curious, Amelia, let’s try together.” A normal sized phoenix and a regular sized fish appeared. “Curious.”

“Professor,” asked Harry, “Where is Auror McKinney?”

Dumbledore smiled. “She is at the hospital wing, Harry. Perhaps you and the others would like to see her for a moment. We can take this up later. Director, are there any other questions that you need answered right now?”

“No. That will do for now.” She was slightly embarrassed that the teens asked about McKinney before she had.

“Perhaps Susan would like to show you her living area. I need to get the staff back together for a few moments. Amelia, if you don’t have other plans, perhaps you would like to stay for dinner?”

-----

Since everyone was back by noon that afternoon, Dumbledore announced that there would be an informal dance that evening, open to all of the students. It would take place after the regularly scheduled Halloween feast. Hermione, Ginny, and Susan each decided that they needed to get back to their room to get ready.

Harry went to visit Auror McKinney. She was in the bed shaking. Harry went up and held her arm. “Hi. I’m sorry if we got off on the wrong foot today. I’m really glad that you came today to help us. I’m sorry that things didn’t turn out so well.” He conjured a dozen roses and a vase to set by her nightstand. He got up to leave.

Tears were welled in her eyes. “Wait. I’m sorry. Tonks said you’re a great guy. I thought she was just saying that because you’re famous. Did you really make those horrors go away?”

Harry replied, “I tried to. I had a lot of help. Did they hurt you?”

Tears were running down her face by now. Harry gave her a friendly hug. After several minutes she had calmed down and somehow felt a

bit better. "Thanks. Thanks for rescuing me, and thanks for coming to see me. You really are a great guy."

"I'm grateful that you were there for Tonks. I'm just trying to repay the favor. I'll stop by to see you in the morning if you don't mind?"

She nodded.

In the other office, Poppy just smiled to herself.

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Harry went back to his room to take a nap. The morning had somehow left him exhausted. Three hours later he felt better.

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Harry thought that informal was one of the most misused words that he knew of. Walking out of his room in grey slacks and a blue oxford shirt, he knew that he was in trouble. The witches were all dressed up for the dance. One disapproving glance from Hermione, and without a word, Harry went back into his room. Returning five minutes later wearing black pants, green dress robes, dress shoes, a white shirt and tie, Harry heard Susan tell him to "lose the tie."

Walking back in his room, he took off his tie, and shirt. He returned a minute later wearing a black, banded collar shirt under his robes. "Perfect," said Ginny, giving him a lusty smile. "Now let's have a butterbeer before we go."

"But we'll be..."

"Sit, Potter," commanded Susan.

"What guidebook have I forgotten to read?" asked Harry, recalling seeing Susan the last time, and smiling to himself.

"Ours," said Hermione, giving him a lusty smile. "You were supposed to read our minds, silly."

The women all looked beautiful, and Harry told them each of them that they all looked fantastic, gorgeous, and stunning.

“Thanks,” they said. “You clean up pretty good yourself.”

Ten minutes later, they walked down the hall to get to the Great Hall. Seeing no one in the corridors along the way, Harry concluded that they were late. As they walking through the doors and down the steps to the Great Hall, the room went stone silent. The only sound that could be heard was their footsteps as they reached their spaces at the table. Dumbledore rose, and as on cue, each of the students stood.

Moody broke the silence, saying, “Good work, you four.”

Dumbledore put his hands together and the entire room applauded them. After a minute he said, “Well done indeed. We are all in your debt, Miss Bones, Miss Granger, Miss Weasley and Mr. Potter. There is much to be said, but now is not the time, so if you would, tuck in.” Everyone sat down and enjoyed an exceptional dinner and a wide selection of deserts.

Harry noticed that Director Bones, Remus, Kingsley, and Auror McKinney were also at the head table. He nodded to each of them. After dinner, Dumbledore cleared away the long tables, and replaced them with forty round tables that each sat ten.

From a lot of perspectives, the string quartet that Dumbledore found at the last minute worked much better than the Weird Sisters. For the inexperienced dancers, the slower tunes required only a basic box step and remembering to avoid stepping on your partner’s feet. Hopefully with experience comes at least some wisdom. Harry had worn his black dress loafers as they had the softest soles of any dress shoes that he owned.

Another difference between tonight and the ill-fated dance held during the tri-wizard tournament was that this year, Harry had nothing to prove, and wasn’t nervous in the least. He danced with Ginny, Hermione and Susan three times each. In each case, it was like dancing with an angel. He loved holding them. They were so beautiful

and graceful. Strangely, the other students didn't ask Harry's girls to dance until he'd had left the dance floor to get a butterbeer.

As Harry was in line to get a butterbeer, Katie Bell came up to him, and said "Hi Harry. Care to dance with an old friend?"

He gave her a little hug. "I'd love to Katie. You look really great. I've missed visiting with you."

"Me too. By the way, thanks for saving all of our lives today."

"No worries. It seemed like the right thing to do." They both looked at each other and smiled sad smiles. It was easier to smile than cry. She hugged him back.

"Seriously Harry, after all you've done, I feel like a fool for asking anything of you, but could you possibly spend an hour working with Dennis Creevey? He's the new seeker this year. He's not a bad flyer, but he's not you." She held him a little tighter than necessary for their dance.

Harry replied, "As a teacher, I can't go flying with him, but I can meet with him at four tomorrow, after D.A."

"Thanks Harry." She kissed him on the cheek. "I really appreciate it. So how's the saving the world business?"

"Huh?" Harry missed a step, and stepped on his own foot.

Guiding him, so he wouldn't fall over, Katie said, "Harry, it wasn't hard to figure out that it was you who nabbed Umbridge, Lestrangle, Malfoy and Edgecombe over the summer. Who did you get in July? I couldn't figure that one."

"I found the wizard who had betrayed my parents, and helped get them murdered, Peter Pettigrew. It wasn't published, and it's kind of a secret." Harry didn't mention taking any of the Death Eaters' lives at the Weasleys. If Katie suspected or knew anything about that evening, she said nothing.



She replied, "I won't say anything. You're a good man Harry. I'm very proud to call you my friend."

"Likewise, and you're a great dancer, Katie. I enjoyed visiting with you."

"The pleasure was mine. Thanks for the dance Harry." She kissed him on the cheek again.

"Bye."

After dancing with Katie, Harry looked over at Auror McKinney. She was sitting by herself. Glancing over at Ginny, who nodded, Harry walked up to her table and asked, "Auror McKinney, are you up to one dance this evening?"

She smiled at him and said, "Certainly Mr. Potter. Please lead the way."

Harry did at least a decent job with his box step. There were no toe injuries on either side and no near misses either. She seemed to be having a pleasant time, so Harry tried his hand at conversation. "Teresa, I wanted to thank you again for coming to help us today. I know that this was your day off. I really do appreciate it. I'm also very glad that you seem to be feeling better. I'm really glad that you're here." He looked into her light green eyes for a moment.

"Mr. Potter, it's my pleasure. Thanks again for saving me."

"The pleasure was mine. Thanks for the dance too."

Harry was about to sit down when Ginny shook her head, and pointed to Poppy. Knowing better than to argue, he walked up to her table and asked, "Healer Pomfrey, may I have the honor of this dance?"

Pomfrey beamed at him, surprised that he'd take the time to spend with someone old enough to be his grandmother. "Why thank you, Mr. Potter. I'd be truly delighted."

After visiting with her for a dance, Harry was also directed to ask, little Hanna Smith, and Director Bones for a dance each. When Harry had finished, they thanked him for a lovely evening. Finally when Harry looked back at the table with his housemates, the three witches each waved him over. "Thank you Harry. They each really appreciated your thoughtfulness. You'll be well rewarded. Please take us back to our room now."

The three witches were good to their word. Harry was treated very well that evening.

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## Chapter 5

To an outsider, their relationship would almost certainly appear strange, and would most likely be described incorrectly, either in unfounded crude terms, or as Potter and his groupies. Neither assessment would be accurate or even close to the truth.

There was no hero worship in the group. If anything, it was Harry who woke up each morning thinking that he had somehow been placed in the company of angels. While the four had come up with the spoken/unspoken agreement that none of them were ready to have sex, that didn't preclude them from becoming very familiar with each other. Over time they learned how to give each other love, pleasure and comfort. They were in every sense of the word intimate, and in love – caring, kindness, affection, placing other's needs first, and they were highly committed. They were committed both to each other and to their common cause. As Dumbledore had noticed, together they were much more than the sum of their individual selves.

Harry woke early on Sunday, and carefully tried to untangle himself from their gentle, yet hungry grasp. They were going to help the Grangers move back into their own home today. They had found a wonderful housewarming gift for Dan and Emma. It was a painting of Hogwarts that had been charmed so a designated person (Hermione) would be a part of the painting – inconspicuously painted into the background so it was appropriate in non-magical homes. If the person was on the castle grounds, they would be in the picture. Better yet, the painting could be magically sized and shaded to fit into almost any room or decor. Susan and Ginny had also taken a number of photos of Hermione alone and with the others, both in magical and nonmagical settings so her parents would have things to display on their new walls. Susan also had taken some of them together at Harry's home.

They arrived at Harry's home at eight. Winky had prepared breakfast for them. Molly, Arthur, Fred, George, Bill, Charlie, Tonks, Dan and Emma were already there waiting for them.

Hermione immediately noticed the odd looks that they received when they walked into the back door. Charlie said, "Harry, we're undecided

whether to bow down at your feet, or slap you on the side of the head. What the ef were you doing battling a hundred dementors and twenty Death Eaters?"

Before Harry could say a word Molly piped in, "Why can't you children leave these things to the Aurors or the Order? You have no business getting involved in..."

Ginny wasn't going to stand another word of this. "Mum, we love you dearly, but you don't have a clue what you're talking about." Charlie was about to say something, but one glance from her, and those thoughts withered away. "The dementors were using the Aurors to wipe their feet with. Hermione and I hit most of those Death Eaters, while Susan and Harry killed, yes I said killed sixteen of those hellish creatures. The only person there from the Order was unconscious ten seconds after the fighting started."

The lithe redhead was just getting started, "I suppose you wanted Harry, Susan and Hermione to walk away from the Three Broomsticks while it was burning up like our home did was except that the pub had 250 people in it! The building had collapsed from the fire by the time Professor Dumbledore had arrived." Molly shuddered at the thought. There were tears in her eyes.

Bill, who had more sense than most, could feel the magical energy that this very pissed off young witch was building up. He calmly walked up to her, and gave her a hug and kiss. "Come on, Sis, let' go outside for a minute. I need to ask you something. Miraculously she went with her brother, and the others had the good sense to stand down.

Hermione took a look at the Daily Prophet that was on the table. With the exception of the omission of the killing of the dementors, it was quite accurate. Seamus, Madam Rosmerta, another shopkeeper, Director Bones and Dumbledore were quoted. Rita had written a very good article. Hermione said, "The newspaper is basically correct. About 350 students were there for a Hogsmeade visit. The four of us, along with Remus, Kingsley and another Auror were asked to keep an eye on the students. Harry saw the dementors and shouted that

everyone should get inside. Everyone who could cast a Patronus charm helped in some way. Somehow by using their staffs together, Harry and Susan were able to create strong enough forms to kill a few of the dementors. We weren't looking for trouble. It found us, and we reacted to it as well as we could. Can we please start this visit over? Mum, Dad, I'm really happy to see you both today. We all missed you guys so much."

Between Ginny's rage and Hermione's cool logic, everyone had found an answer that they were OK with and the subject was dropped. Arthur had arranged to have two of the old fashioned ministry touring cars available to take everyone to Crawley where the Grangers lived. They arrived just before the delivery lorry.

Dan and Emma's new home was beautiful. It had a brick and fieldstone outside, a tiled roof, and a lot of large glass windows. Harry noticed that there were quite a few yard lights, and motion sensors around the grounds. The inside of the home was understated elegance. The floors were slate or hardwood with a light oak finish. The walls were either plaster and lathe or brick. Harry noticed that the windows were quite thick and appeared to be reinforced Plexiglas.

Officially, the home had six bedrooms and three bathrooms. Emma told them that they would fit up four of the bedrooms and leave the other two as studies.

Once the delivery lorry had arrived, there was plenty for everyone to do. Like Harry, Dan and Emma had ordered a truckload of the basics that they would need to start their life over in their new home. There were boxes and packages for the kitchen, a DVD and CD player, TV, entertainment center, sofas, beds, bookshelves, chairs, lamps, linens, a dining room table and chairs, beds, dressers, nightstands, desks, bathroom towels, window treatments, rugs and such. As before, it was obvious that Emma had exceptional taste in decorating.

Harry and Dan worked on installing the window blinds while Bill and Charlie moved the bedroom furniture and set up the beds. Molly helped Emma unpack the kitchen, while Hermione and Ginny worked on the bathrooms and linens. Tonks and Susan disposed of the many

empty packing boxes that quickly accumulated. Harry thought of Dobby and Winky at eleven and asked them for their help.

By noon, they were done moving the bigger pieces. Arthur (as expected) had volunteered to work in the family room, and had miraculously only tripped the circuit breakers once. At noon, Dobby and Winky returned with a roast turkey dinner, potatoes, vegetables, rolls, and several pies for dessert. They also brought a case of butterbeer, a case of wine, and sodas for everyone.

When they were ready to eat, Emma said the table grace, thankful for receiving a second chance in life. They certainly had losses to carry, but things could have been much worse. Tears welled in Molly's eyes at Emma's words, but she was truly happy for her new friends. The Weasleys and Tonks departed after the dinner and dessert had been cleared away.

Before the teens left, Dan and Emma found Harry and pleaded with him to keep their daughter safe. "I'll keep her happy and safe. I promise," said Harry. Dan shook his hand again, while Emma hugged him for several minutes. They both thanked him again for taking them in for the summer. "It was the least I could do to help. We'll see you again in a few weeks. Thanks for letting us help you today."

Ginny reminded Harry of the housewarming gifts as they were about to leave. The castle painting was beautiful, and the two dentists loved it. Hermione transfigured the different photo frames to match the walls. They both thanked the teens again for their thoughtfulness and generosity. "Photos are important sir. Best wishes on your new home. We need to leave now."

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The D.A. meeting was interrupted when Professor Dumbledore, and the heads of houses came into Harry's classroom. Dumbledore awarded each of the students who could produce a Patronus 25 house points saying, "Well done indeed. Each of you demonstrated courage and your abilities in helping defend the other students on Saturday." Like the other Heads of Houses, Minerva was very proud of the group. True there were more Gryffindors than students from

any of the other houses, but there were some Slytherins there too, as well as Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. Harry and the others had truly turned this into a diverse, yet cohesive group. It was an excellent demonstration of his leadership skills.

After the meeting, Harry met with Katie and Dennis to talk about Quidditch strategy. Harry talked about the idea of floating above the game focusing on finding the snitch rather than watching the game play out. He advised Dennis against the common strategy adopted by newer seekers of following the other team's seeker for several reasons. In Harry's experience, it had never proven effective, and it was unlikely to work unless you had a lot faster broom than your opponent. There was also the likelihood of being on the short end of a feint.

Reminded of brooms, Katie pulled a small package out of her robes, and handed it to Dennis after expanding it. Dennis opened the case. It was a Firebolt just like Harry's! She told him that it was this year's presentation to the team from the Ron Weasley Memorial Quidditch fund. Dennis handed the broom to Harry to inspect. Harry looked it over, while remembering kind thoughts of his deceased his friend, and said, "Dennis, I know that Ron would be pleased to see you catching the snitch on this broom. I know you'll do well."

"Thanks Professor."

Harry smiled. "You'd better go put your broom away, Dennis. Take good care of it."

After Dennis left, Katie asked if she could come back and visit with the others. Harry got her a butterbeer and told the other witches that they had a guest. She asked them if she could possibly train with them next summer. Ginny and Hermione went into some detail as to what they had been and currently were working on. Susan told her that they were doing physical conditioning Monday – Friday from 5:30 - 6:30 and that she was welcome to try it out.

Katie agreed and left shortly afterwards. Hermione noticed that Harry hadn't really said anything to her while she was there and quietly asked him about it. Harry replied, "A year ago last summer, Sirius and

I were talking about one of the Death Eater raids, and Ron happened to have been there. He was like a kid listening to a couple of Army buddies. Everything that he heard sounded glamorous to him. He sounded excited and said that he wanted to go into Auror training too. After the battle at the Department of Mysteries he was a changed person. He never mentioned wanting to be an Auror again, instead he talked about playing for the Cannons.'

Harry said, "that's my concern with Katie. Pulling someone out of a burning building might sound pretty exciting if you were in Gladrags the whole time."

Hermione nodded at her tired friend. "I understand Harry. Katie didn't sign up to go on any commando raids yet, just work out with us in the morning. I know what you meant about Ron, and I respect what you're saying. Let's give her a chance and see what happens. Maybe she's willing to risk dangerous adventures simply because she likes dancing with you." She smiled at Harry, and he laughed back at her. They could gently tease each other and never get offended.

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"Please Professor?"

He smiled at their enthusiasm "OK, if you can spark all one hundred balloons within a minute without any of you getting hit by any of the five tennis balls that I'm going to toss, then I'll show you."

As before, Harry conjured the balloons. This time they were smaller, about the size of bludgers rather than quaffles and he charmed the air, so there was a light breeze to move the balloons.

Harry looked at his watch and said, "OK, go."

Pop, pop, pop. The students as a whole were making improvements in their quickness and aim. Harry prepared to toss the first ball. He noticed that several of the students were carefully watching him rather than the balloons. Harry tossed the ball at one of the little wizards who was taking aim at a balloon.



“Duck Randy,” cried one of the watcher students. In an instant, Randy was face down flat on the mat. Harry had previously shown the students how to fall and land without getting hurt. The ball sailed past him.

Pop, pop, pop. More balloons were hit. Harry picked up three balls this time to throw at the same time. He threw them. “Duck.” The entire class flattened onto the mats, as the tennis balls sailed harmlessly past.

With about thirty seconds left, there were about a fourth of the balloons remaining. Harry recharmed the air to make the balloons move faster. Harry picked up his last tennis ball and threw it at the wall. It bounced and headed straight towards one of the little witches. “Hanna.” She saw the ball and immediately took a side step to her right and the tennis ball narrowly missed her.

Pop, pop, pop. With ten seconds to spare, the class had sparked all of the balloons and no one had been hit. “Well done,” said Harry “Good calls defense team. Good aiming offense team. Everyone dropped and landed like you should. Good sidestep Hanna.”

“Quit stalling Professor,” said a few of the little wizards.

So much for awing them with my fame, thought Harry. He dimmed the lights and took out his wand. Thinking of Ginny he said, “Expecto Patronum.” A brilliant white stag flew from his wand and walked around the classroom for a minute until it vanished.

“Wow!!!” was the collective response from the class.

After the form had disappeared, the students began to fill their book bags. Harry said, “Thanks for helping me teach you this morning. For next week, please read chapter 10 from your book.

“Thank you Professor Potter,” they each said as they filed out the door.

After the last student left, Moody came in the door and said, “Good job Potter. Show them the basics - Wand handling, casting accuracy

and physical agility. None of the other Professors cover those things. Was it your idea to have them split into offensive and defensive units?"

"No. They came up with that idea on their own about a week ago. How are you?"

"I'm OK. I wish I had a fifth of the mobility of that young lass. I'd like to kick a few more Death Eaters in the arse if I still could."

"Your work here is very valuable. The DA group is doing a lot better this year than last. I'm sure that you have a lot to do with what they're learning."

"I was going to say the same, except attribute most of their success to your work, Professor Potter."

"Huh?"

Dumbledore, Flitwick and the other Heads of House walked into Harry's classroom. Moody said, "Harry, the examiners returned your NEWT scores yesterday. You certified in all three topics." Harry nodded, very pleased at the news.

Dumbledore said, "Harry, at the same time, the School Board of Governors has conferred for you the designation of Full Professorship. Congratulations." He shook Harry's hand.

Minerva said, "The first and second years talk of almost nothing but your class."

Daily said, "I hear them talk about it constantly in my classes too."

Harry said, "I'm sorry. Potions and Charms and Transfiguration are just as important."

Flitwick said, "Harry that's not the point. You've raised the teaching bar, and captured their interest. It's our challenge to have the students be as engaged in our classes as well. Congratulations."

Minerva said, "Congratulations truly are in order. We're all very proud of you." Each of the women gave him hugs.

Harry said, "Thanks, but I mostly show them how to use things that I've already learned in your classes."

Daily said, "Thank you Harry. For the most part we didn't invent the knowledge that's covered in our classes either. It is the application of what you have learned, and your ability to transfer those skills to others that makes you an excellent Instructor. We're all just trying to say keep up the good work."

"Oh. I will. You can count on me."

Dumbledore said, "We know that we can Harry. We all wish you continued success. Your friends are waiting to see you at lunch. Enjoy your day, Professor."

"Thank you all, for everything."

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## Chapter 6

The first Quidditch game of the year featured Slytherin house against Gryffindor. Neither team bore much resemblance to the teams that Harry had played on or against.

Gryffindor was led by seventh year chaser, Katie Bell. She had found a second and third year witch for the other chaser positions. Dennis Creevey also had been designated as the new seeker. The two pathetic batsmen from the last game of last year had somehow remained on the team. Dean Thomas was playing keeper. Katie had also assembled a full squad of reserves consisting of first through fourth years. It was a building year, but with the exception of keeping the two weak beaters, Harry thought that Katie had made good choices.

The Slytherin team had been completely decimated. Four of the players expected to start this year were dead or in prison. The others had graduated last year. As a result, it also consisted of second and third year students. As Professor Daily had no personal interest or previous playing experience playing Quidditch, the team was captained and coached by Graham Pritchard, a third year playing keeper.

Harry sat by the witches. Madam Hooch asked the two captains to shake hands and the game began. There was no dirty rivalry between the two houses, rather fourteen players, each trying not to look like fools in front of the rest of the school. The Gryffindor chasers were largely having their way with the Quaffle, not because of any amazing passing ability, rather because Pritchard couldn't effectively play his position and marshal the team at the same time. As a result, he was blocking only about a fourth of the shots. Bell was being double or triple teamed, leaving the other two chasers wide open to take shots.

After two hours the score was 280 – 90. Harry had seen the snitch a half dozen times, but neither seeker had seen it. Both kept looking in the same spots over and over, not realizing that they would have limited success if they kept searching the same ten percent of the

field area over and over. In both cases, their searches were two-dimensional and they kept looking in front and below them.

A few minutes later Dennis saw the snitch fly right past him. He started in an obvious pursuit. The Slytherin seeker saw him chasing the snitch, and was soon following. As luck would have it, the snitch flew in a straight and level direction for a few seconds, and Dennis having the faster broom was able to grab it. Gryffindor won the game 440 to 100, one of its largest wins.

As unbiased as Harry was supposed to be, he was very happy for Katie, and glad that no one had gotten hurt. With a win of that many points, they will be in a better position when they played the more experienced Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw teams, especially if the Slytherin team improved, and kept the rest of their matches closer.

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In early November, Harry decided that he wanted to really celebrate Christmas this year. He invited, Molly and Arthur, Bill, Charlie & guests, Fred, George & guests, Katie, Poppy, Flitwick, McGonagall, Dumbledore, Hagrid, Tonks & her father, Mrs. Figg, Moody, Lupin, Susan & Amelia, Hermione and her parents, and of course Ginny. He decided to send out an invitation before too many of the people that he wanted to invite had made other plans.

Dear

I am hosting a Christmas Eve celebration this year and would be honored if you would consider attending. If you can, please arrive at noon. You are welcome to stay the night if you would prefer. Please bring one extra gift to pass around. Please wear whatever you would be most comfortable in.

RSVP

Harry Potter

Christmas had never been an exciting or particularly pleasant time of the year for Harry. Growing up watching the Dursleys and Marge

exchange scores of gifts with each other while pointedly ignoring him had largely soured Harry on the event.

Afterwards, he'd gotten the cast-offs in a cruel variation of Boxing Day. Petunia had always left the best items outside (possibly in an attempt to impress the neighbors) leaving Harry with the really terrible things.

Then came life at Hogwarts. He'd received his first new clothing ever – a hand knitted sweater from Mrs. Weasley. Someone had thought enough of him to spend hours (even magically) to make him a gift. She'd only met him once at the time, when she found him standing alone in the train station, and got him on the train. Fred and George carried his trunk onto the train when he was too small to lift it himself.

Dan and Emma Granger had helped him select and set up everything for his new home. Hermione had always stood by him. Always. During the times when almost everyone had called him a dark wizard, a fame seeking git, or a nutter, she had stood by him. Dan's words I married my best friend kept coming back to him.

Amelia Bones had freed him, getting him a magic license while overlooking the serious infractions that he'd committed. Susan was so kind to him. There was no hero worship. He was just Harry to her, and she let him know it. Like Hermione, she knew him and liked him anyway.

Hagrid had rescued Harry, twice. Harry would never forget him standing down Vernon who was holding a loaded rifle to get Harry away from them.

Remus had opened up knowledge of Harry's parents to him, and like the Weasleys, done what he could to help him.

While he hadn't always respected Dumbledore's methods Harry did respect his skills and his intent.

Tonks had shown him – Tonks had taught him (he smiled as he corrected himself) the art of Morphing. She'd always treated him with respect, even when he'd been a moody brat and hadn't deserved it.

Poppy had helped him out of a self-destructive funk. After Sirius was murdered, Harry had been in a fragile emotional condition. She had helped him feel a lot better about himself, and he knew that she hadn't simply been doing her job. She genuinely cared about him.

Flitwick had helped him see people for the person that they really were, not their size or shape. He'd also gone a long way to ensure that Harry would be a success as an Instructor.

Harry smiled as he thought about Ginny. She was his auburn haired angel. Just thinking of her stirred his senses. Those eyes, those lips, those... Harry smiled as he shook himself back to reality.

Christmas should be about family and loved ones. He realized that he now had a lot of family. We vowed to do everything that he could to keep them safe.

-----

At about the same time that Harry was reflecting on some of Ginny's fine assets, Remus was visiting Dumbledore, McGonagall, Moody, Pomfrey and Flitwick prior to one of the Order meetings. "What's next for Harry's training?" asked Remus. A part of Remus felt that Harry's own training had been sidetracked by his teaching and DA leadership roles.

McGonagall filled Remus in on what had happened when Hermione's transfigured the marble shield on Halloween. Being unconscious at the time, he'd never really understood what had happened. Flitwick had described the blood staves that the Apprentices had made. Moody described the skills that Harry had helped the nearly 200 students that he'd been helping in his different functions

Finally Dumbledore described the other training that Harry had acquired. "We don't know what he can't yet do, but we know these things; Harry has somehow acquired a natural healing ability." With a twinkle in his eye he added, "It seems to be most effective on women that he has some sort of bond with."

Pomfrey added, "He spent less than an hour with that young Auror who'd been attacked by those horrors in Hogsmede. She was catatonic when she was brought in. I expected that she would have spent a month or more at St. Mungo's getting sorted out, and six hours later, I saw her up, and on the dance floor. I'm positive that he saved Tonk's life that day he saw her in St. Mungo's. I won't go into specifics, but I'm positive."

Flitwick added, "We did spell strength testing a few weeks ago. He is as powerful with his wand as I am with my blood staff!!!"

McGonagall added, "He blew a hole in that burning building big enough to drive two automobiles through side by side. I couldn't do that on my best day. From what I saw on Saturday afternoon, if he and Susan had tried it together, they'd have blown up the whole building."

Not having seen the display that they'd done for Director Bones, Remus asked, "What do you mean?"

Dumbledore replied, "It would appear that somehow if Harry and one or more of the young women that he has grown attached to cast the same spell together, the results of their combined effort far exceed their individual contributions. It is as if their power is somehow multiplied, rather than added."

Flitwick agreed. "That makes sense. Say that Susan could cast at a spell power level of 1 with her wand and 2 with her blood staff. Harry can cast at about a level 3 with his wand, and at a level 6 or 7 with his blood staff. Together that would put them at about 13 times a normal wizard's spell strength."

Moody said, "That would explain how they were able to kill those sixteen dementors. No one has ever done that before."

McGonagall replied, "Heaven help the person who went after all four of them at once."

Dumbledore thought about her words but didn't say anything. Instead, he asked, Remus "Does that seem to be a sufficient rate of progress



to you? He's probably happier now than at any time in his life, He's passed half his NEWTS a year and a half early, and has made some interesting discoveries of his abilities."

Remus replied, "That's my concern. I could have taken him to OWL or possibly NEWT level myself, but where does he go from here? What level does he need to be at to do what he needs to do?"

Dumbledore nodded in agreement. "That is difficult to say. None of us can say with certainty that Riddle will be put down from a specific spell or circumstance. Much of our insight into Riddle's current plans was lost with the passing of Severus."

Remus replied, "Seeing as Harry and the witches are fighting a war while you are waging one, perhaps it would make sense to ask them what they would like to learn for the next term. They may have some insight s to what would be the most help for themselves."

Dumbledore replied, "Indeed, the torch is nearly ready to be passed. The question on my mind is are they ready to join the Order, or are we ready to join his group?"

If he would even have us, thought McGonagall. She'd heard from Molly the week before asking about the events at Hogsmeade. Ginny and Remus had both made good points. The Order had probably done as much to impede Harry and his friends in the last year as help him.

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"Harry please?"

"We're just not ready. That doesn't mean that I don't love you."

"I know. I just want to. I love you too."

"I know. Thank you so much."

"OK. Close your eyes then."

When the lithe Witch had finished, all Harry could do was catch his breath and say, "Thanks."

"Don't mention it, and I thank you too."

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"Remus, I need your help."

"Anything."

"I need to go shopping tomorrow, and I can't bring the others."

Remus was amused at Harry's apparent embarrassment. "Where do you want to go?"

"London, Paris, Brighton, St. Andrews, Detroit, and Bermuda. I'll need portkeys to Paris, St. Andrews, Detroit, and Bermuda."

So much for walking him across the street to go to the park, thought Remus. "OK. What else will you need?"

"Passports. I was hoping that you'd come with me."

"I'd be happy to spend the day with you. What time?"

"Seven or eight, if that wouldn't be too early."

"I'll meet you by the front door at seven."

"Thanks."

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## Chapter 7

Dear Harry,

Dan and I would be delighted to spend Christmas Eve at your home. If you are available, we would like to invite you in return for dinner on Boxing Day, December 26. You could come anytime in the early afternoon. We will prepare the guest bedroom for you.

Thanks again for all of your love and consideration that you have shown to our family.

Love,

Emma

Harry put the note down that Hedwig had returned with. He had received similar notes from Molly inviting him to their rebuilt burrow on Saturday 28 December, and dinner with Susan and Amelia on Sunday 29 December. In all three cases, he had been invited to stay for the evening. Everyone else had indicated that they could be able to attend for at least part of the time.

Harry'd had a great time shopping with Remus. He had attempted to find a gift or two for everyone that would either keep them safer, delight them, or both. He had brought them back to his home to keep his excessively inquisitive housemates from accidentally stumbling upon any of the gifts. Ginny and Susan kept trying to pry advance information out of him, with no avail, though Harry and Hermione found their efforts highly amusing.

Winter break that year would be 16 days from Dec 21 until January 5. Harry had hoped to spend an afternoon with Tonks and continue his work on morphing. He also wanted to look through some of the magical weapons that had come with the house. One of the days, he needed to visit Gringotts to do some account transfers and sign some paperwork in connection with his investments.

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Katie had been attending the early morning workout sessions for several weeks now. After the first session when she had arrived wearing a baggy sweatshirt and sweatpants, Hermione had loaned her some of the clingy Lycra exercise outfits like the other women had chosen to wear. While nowhere near as strong as the other women had become, she was surprisingly fit and agile for a witch.

Harry was practicing with his wooden sword one morning, when Katie asked him if he would show her some of the basic moves. He loaned her one of the wooden practice swords, a Katana style Bokken with a 30 inch blade and a ten inch two-handed handle.

Harry showed her several of the different stances, how to hold the Samurai style sword, basic blocks, thrusts and stabs. Each morning since, the apprentices arrived in the morning to find Katie already at work. "Can we practice together for a while, Harry?"

"Sure. Put this on first. I'll turn around." Harry loaned her Susan's Dragonhide vest. He also handed her a pair of gloves to wear. "They may be wooden swords, but they hurt like the dickens if you get hit with one."

They practiced parrying for a while. Katie would thrust and Harry would block. The wooden swords made a click, clack sound as they struck each other. Harry started very slowly, demonstrating each move, and proper form. After a bit they worked up a bit of speed. Ginny watched as Katie went through the different moves that they were practicing on.

"Very good Katie," she said. "You're picking that up very quickly."

"Thanks Ginny. Have you been working on that long?"

"We started last summer. Harry is amazing to watch."

"Will you show me?" asked Katie.

"Harry, do you have enough time?" asked Ginny, getting ready.

"Sure."

Ginny put her gear on and faced Harry, bowing.

Click, clack, clack, they went through the same moves that Harry had just gone through with Katie except seven or eight times faster.

“Merlin!” said Katie, watching the two flash by her. Click, clack, clack, the wooden Bokkens chattered as the two dodged and weaved. At a predetermined moment, they stopped, and again bowed to each other.

“It’s a different type of exercise than lifting weights or stretching, though that’s important too,” he said, watching Hermione and Susan work together. “You get a lot better at balance, and your movement becomes more fluid.”

“Harry is about twice as fast as the level that we were just practicing,” said Ginny, obviously proud of her boyfriend. “He and his trainer are like two blurs as they work together.”

“You are getting a lot quicker yourself,” said Harry. “You have amazing balance and form.”

“Thanks,” said Ginny. She hadn’t been fishing for a complement, but it was nice to hear.

“We need to get going,” said Harry

“Wait, Harry,” said Katie. “Is it too late to accept your Christmas invitation?”

“Not at all,” replied Harry. “You’ll need to see Dumbledore to get a portkey. We’ll see you Tuesday at noon.”

“Wait Katie,” said Ginny. She seemed to have been waiting for the opportunity to say something. “Do you need a place to stay for the holiday? There’s plenty of room at Harry’s home.”

There were tears welled in Katie’s eyes. Her parents had been murdered just about the time that school had started. Harry hadn’t

known that she probably didn't have a place to stay. "Thanks that would be really nice of you, if it isn't too much trouble."

Ginny glanced at Harry, who nodded.

She said, "Harry has some extra rooms in his home. You can stay there as long as you'd like. There's a nice library, and a training room to use. Besides, he's really good to his house guests." Hermione and Susan glanced at each other and quietly giggled.

Harry, said, "Now that's settled, you still need to get a portkey from Dumbledore. We will leave tomorrow morning at 9:00. I'll meet you by the front entrance."

-----

Dumbledore took the time to thank each and every one of the teaching staff that afternoon at his staff meeting. Dumbledore asked Harry if they could visit together on the morning of December 24, before his other guests would arrive. Harry invited Dumbledore to arrive at ten rather than noon.

"As you requested, I made a portkey for Miss Bell. I understand that you have offered to allow her to stay at your fine home." Patting Harry on the shoulder the ancient Wizard said, "Harry, that was very generous of you to make such an offer. Thank you. Her parents were good people and deserved better than they received."

"I hadn't heard that anything had happened to them. Had it been in the Daily Prophet?"

"Yes, but in insufficient detail to be of any use. Miss Bell's mother had previously worked as an Auror, and had originally been responsible for the trying to arrest McNair a few years back. It is likely that he had something to do with their murder this September. We can talk more about this again over the holidays if you wish. Enjoy your time off, Harry."

"Thank you Sir, and you too."

-----

As Harry arrived back at the common room, it was obvious that the witches were up to something.

“What’s wrong?” asked Harry.

“We were just thinking that this will be the first time that we’ll have been apart in nearly six months,” said Ginny.

Hermione and Susan looked a bit depressed at the thought.

Harry said, “If the three of you are up for a little adventure on the Friday and Saturday after Christmas, I could think of something that we could do. As such, you may want to bring your equipment with you, or I could take it to my home if it would mean fewer questions.”

He continued, “It is likely that it was McNair that murdered Katie’s parents. It is also almost certain that he had something to do with the fire at your home Ginny. Maybe we could get a lead as to where he might be and encourage him to surrender.”

“Or maybe we could feed him to Buckbeak,” said Hermione, remembering his evil intent from her third year.

“Or to one of Charlie’s dragons. Maybe Norbert would eat him,” said Ginny

Harry smiled. “We need to find him first. Please don’t mention anything about him to your parents,” said Harry. “They worry enough as it is.” Changing the subject, Harry asked, “Gin, can you do me a favor?”

“Of course.”

“Can you go to Gryffindor tower and get Katie’s exact sizes. I need to buy her a few little things.”

A wicked glint fell across Ginny's eyes and she smiled back at her boyfriend. "Is there anything that you'd like help with, or do you enjoy picking out little things yourself?"

Harry knew that he was getting backed into a corner. "I'd really love your help, but I know your parents want to spend some time alone with you, and it wouldn't be fair to take that away from them. I'll see you at noon on the 24th."

Hermione asked, "Sleeping bags tonight, or would you two like a bit of time to yourselves?"

Harry looked at Ginny who promptly winked at him and said, "Bags by the fireplace if you please."

"Harry, lay down on your back right there by the warm fireplace. Close your eyes. Hermione, lay down right there. Close your eyes. Susan, lay down right there. Close your eyes. Harry, raise your hands in the air." He did as she asked. Ginny walked over and placed one hand there, and placed the other hand there. "Harry, we want you to lay there and think wonderful thoughts. Good... Good... Better... Keep your eyes closed... Stop wiggling Susan."

Ginny knelt down behind him and let her hair fall onto his face. She gently kissed his forehead, then placed another light kiss on his chin finally another on the center of his chest. "mmm."

Harry did have wonderful thoughts on his mind. So did the beautiful witches.

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Harry woke up very early the next morning. The fire had died down. In the dim light, he carefully covered the three witches up with his sleeping bag, showered and went to his classroom to exercise. He looked at the charts that they had kept. They were much stronger in December than they had recorded at the beginning of September.

It was still very early, so we went back to the common room. He snuggled up next to Ginny. Her faint smell of vanilla was so



comforting to him. He gently kissed the nape of her neck, and in the softest of whispers said, "I love you Ginny."

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As the words were leaving Harry's lips, less kind words were being spoken in Riddle Manor. "Yes, my lord. The plan is in place. They will not see the new year."

With red eyes flashing, Riddle said, "The choice is yours McNair. They will be dead on January first, or you will. Go now. I have other work to do."

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Harry woke up again at seven. The witches were in their rooms packing their trunks. He vanished the sleeping bags and thought of Dobby. Moments later, the little elf appeared with a POP.

"Good morning, Harry Potter sir. How can Dobby help you sir?"

"Good morning Dobby. I'm glad to see you too. Please bring my trunk back home. I will be there by eleven. People will begin arriving in the afternoon. Please be certain that there is plenty of butterbeer on hand, probably ten cases."

"Dobby will sees you soon Harry Potter sir." The little elf hugged Harry, and then with a soft pop, vanished.

Harry gave the angels a hug and a kiss. "I'll see you on Tuesday."

"Bye Harry. Be careful."

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"Hi Harry," said Katie. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, but we have a few stops on the way home. We will apparate to Gringotts, then walk to a shop first, then we need to pick up a few things at Harrods."

They walked to the Hogwarts station, waved goodbye to the different witches and wizards, then apparated to the lobby of Gringotts.

Two hours later, they were in the car park behind Harry's home. Harry opened his wallet, and showed her the slip of paper that told her that Harry Potter lived at 12 Grimmauld Place. She turned around, and saw Winky standing holding the back door open. "Welcome home, Sir and Miss."

Harry introduced Katie to Dobby and Winky, and showed her where her room was. He placed her in the room across the hall from Ginny's room.

Katie could not believe her morning. First Harry had taken her to a magical armory ship to pick up a suit of dragonhide armor that he'd previously ordered to be made especially for her. Then he somehow knew that the only things that she had in the world was the clothing that she'd brought to school. They walked into Harrods, and he was treated like their very best customer. The three sales consultants had found her an entire wardrobe in about an hour.

When they portkeyed to a car park, she had been amazed to see his home. She always thought he'd been pretty poor growing up, and to see him walk into his own mansion was unbelievable. She had grown up in a modest muggle neighborhood in Surrey County a few miles from where Harry had.

Seeing the confusion on her face, Harry brought her to the park behind his home. "Katie, I didn't grow up like this. I lived at my aunt and uncle's home and was made to sleep in a cupboard off of their kitchen until I was eleven. I was an unwanted, mistreated servant in their home, and they let me know that I was a bother to them every single day that I was there. One summer they kept me locked in my room and occasionally gave me a can of cold soup passed through a cat flap. Things have been better for me lately." They continued their walk.

"My parents didn't have a lot, but they gave me a good home. My Mum was an Auror until she got hurt. My Dad was a sportswriter. He

was always so proud of me when I played Quidditch. I really didn't have anyone to turn to when they were killed. Our house burned up. When one of the Aurors took me there to see the wreckage, there was hardly anything left. They didn't have muggle insurance, so that was about it. Fortunately they had already paid my tuition for the year, so I could finish my last year at school."

After a few minutes of comfortable silence, she said, "I'm not complaining. I know that lots of people have lost everything. I just wish it would end." Harry nodded in agreement as they started back home.

They returned from their walk, each feeling like they had learned something new and significant about an old friend.

As they slowly toured the house, Harry asked Katie what her plans were after she finished school. She replied, "Part of me would like to get a tryout for one of the teams, but a bigger part thinks I should do something meaningful. Think about Professor Daily. She worked for years and developed the Wolfsbane potion. Think what that must have meant to Professor Lupin." Harry nodded in appreciation of her words. Katie asked, "Do you ever see him anymore?"

Harry replied, "Yes. I spent some time with him over the summer. We went shopping together a week or so ago."

"Harry, without prying too far into your personal life, what do you want to be in a few years?"

Harry flashed her a sad smile and said, "Alive mostly. Seriously, the war is pretty dangerous right now." Harry thought of the gross insensitivity of what he had just said. He gave Katie a friendly hug and said, "I truly apologize Katie. I hadn't heard about the loss of your parents before this week. I never would have ignored you. I'm really sorry."

"Thanks Harry. I miss my Mum and Dad so much." There were tears welled in her eyes. "I thought everyone was avoiding it to keep from making me feel worse."

They walked into the entertainment room. Harry decided where he wanted his Christmas tree. The big room had a twelve-foot ceiling, so Harry conjured a thick Norwegian Pine tree for the far corner of the room. He showed Katie the memory orb charm that Flitwick had taught him. "Here," said Harry pulling out his wand. "It's a bit like a Pensive memory except you make a Christmas ornament. Think of a special time or person and nod when you are ready."

Katie thought of the first time that the Gryffindor team had won the house cup. All seven were holding the cup and hugging each other. She nodded. Harry carefully withdrew a fine silver strand and gave his wand a little flick and said "Globus." A beautiful glass ball containing the scene that she had thought about appeared. Harry handed it to her. For a moment, their hands touched, and Harry smiled at her. "Go ahead try another memory and let me know when you are ready." Katie nodded and Harry withdrew another strand. When he handed her the glass orb, she looked amazed. Her Mum and Dad were handing an eleven-year-old Katie her Hogwarts letter.

After she had hung the globe on the tree, Katie said, "Let me try. Tell me when you are ready." Harry nodded. Katie withdrew a strand and cast the charm. She handed Harry the glass ball. It was an eleven year old Harry finding out that he was a wizard. Hagrid looked much bigger until Harry realized that he was easily a foot taller now. Harry hung the glass ball on the tree. "Try again." Harry thought again and nodded. Katie looked curiously at him as she handed him the glass ball. It was a man dressed in ragged clothing flying away on a hippogriff at night. She didn't ask and he didn't volunteer anything about it. "Try one more Harry." Harry thought again, and nodded. Katie handed him the globe. Harry and Ginny were eating pizza together at the Pizza Hut.

"Your turn," said Harry after he'd hung the ornament. "We'll do two more each for now. Nod when you're ready." Katie nodded. Harry handed her a globe of the two of them sparing with their wooden swords. Harry smiled as she looked at it. She nodded again. Harry handed her the globe. It was a triumphant Harry flying away holding a golden egg with a Norwegian Ridgeback looking on menacingly.

Katie said, "I was so proud of you. OK, your turn." Harry nodded. She handed him a glass ball of the turkey dinner at the Grangers. When Katie handed Harry the last sphere she smiled. It was from the Halloween feast when the whole school was applauding Harry and the three witches who looked so beautiful that night.

They watched a movie on the television, and Harry had a stroke of inspiration. He thought of Dobby who popped in a moment later. Harry said, "Dobby, please go to the school and bring one of the barn owls from the Owlery." Harry went to his study and wrote a note.

McNair,

I formally challenge you to a duel. 27 December at 6:00 AM at the park in Little Whinging in Surrey County. I will have it charmed with muggle repelling charms. Bring your ax tough guy. I'll bring my sword. Come alone. No Seconds. No wands. You have one minute to accept.

Harry Potter

Dobby had returned by the time that Harry returned. He talked to the owl before sending it on its way. "Please wait one minute for a reply. Be careful. If you get a reply, take it to the park in Little Whinging in Surrey County. I'll be there in the morning to find you. OK?"

The owl gave a soft hoot. Harry stroked him for a minute before sending him on his way.

He would ask Moody to meet him tomorrow at six and go to the park with him to check the envelope for hidden hexes or portkeys.

He would have anti-apparation wards set up in the area surrounding the park, and station the others in that area. If a bunch of Death Eaters apparated to the area, he would have everyone portkey away.

Harry was convinced that in a fair fight, he could take McNair. He was equally convinced that in the event of an unfair fight, he would hold the upper hand. From his training Harry concluded that a large battle ax or halberd which he believed that McNair would be wielding would be much slower than his Hizen-to made Japanese style Katana.

Harry was equally aware that a hit from a battle ax would certainly penetrate his dragonhide armor and cause fearsome damage.

Harry sent Dobby to ask Moody for his help. Dobby arrived five minutes later and told Harry that Moody would be there at 5:30 in the morning.

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## Chapter 8

Harry, Katie, and Moody left the home early the next morning. She knew where the park was, and they apparated there at 6:00. The owl was there. Moody looked at it carefully with his magical eye and pronounced it OK. Harry picked up the owl, patted him several times in thanks and asked him to fly back to school.

They apparated back to Grimmauld place. Moody said, "I suppose you'll be candid enough to let me know what you're really are up to." Katie excused herself and left them alone.

"I formally challenged McNair to a duel. He accepted."

Moody was silent for a moment then asked, "Seconds?"

"None."

"Weapons or wands?"

"His ax, my sword."

"Security?"

"That's part of the reason that I called you. I want to have this in the park where we were at on 27 December at 6:00 AM. I'd like you to place anti-muggle charms around the park, and be certain that there no anti-apparation wards in place after we start. I will station the disillusioned witches nearby to stand guard. I was also hoping that you would agree to referee. I want a fair fight, but I don't want him getting away."

A smile that Harry had not seen before crept onto Moody's scarred face. "I'd be honored to, Potter. It sounds like you thought this through pretty well. Have you invited a Medi-Witch or Healer yet? I have every reason to believe that you're going to kick his arse, but it never hurts to plan for contingencies."

"I'll ask Poppy on Christmas Eve."

Moody shook his head. "I'll do it in Boxing Day. I presume that you haven't mentioned this to Dumbledore?"

Harry replied, "The subject never came up."

Moody gave a little laugh. "I'd have done the same if I were in your shoes." After a pull on his hip flask, Moody asked, "Just so we're square on this, what has McNair done to you?"

Harry set down the butterbeer that he'd been holding. "He helped kill Ron and Luna as well as Katie Bell's parents."

Moody nodded. "Diane Bell was a right nice lass. Too bad she'd got hurt."

"Did you know her?"

"Yes. I was her Mentor in the academy. She was a fine investigator. You gonna use that old Samurai sword of yours"?

"Yes. I think it'll be a lot quicker than his battle ax."

"Quick yes, but don't waste too much time parrying with that tosser, and don't try to break the handle. I've seen it when he worked at the Ministry. It's iron, and a sight more likely to snap your sword's blade if you strike it dead on. That thing weighs a ton, probably twelve pounds. Don't let yourself get hit by it. It'd snap an arm or break a leg even if you only got hit by the pole. Let him swing it a few times. He'll get tired pretty quickly. Just don't get backed into a corner or trip. Don't let him twist the sword out of your hand by getting it caught in the head of his battle ax."

"I won't. Thanks."

"Also keep an eye how far up or down the handle he is holding it. The higher up that he's holding it the quicker he'll be at the cost of loss of reach. He probably won't be wearing any type of armor. The head is quite sharp. Don't let yourself get sliced with it either. I'll see you for Christmas Eve, and thanks for inviting me."



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After Moody left, Katie asked, "What was that all about?"

"I challenged a guy to a duel and was making the arrangements. Please don't mention it to anyone yet."

"I won't. So what are we going to do today?"

"I need to wrap a few gifts. You should put on a tee shirt and break in your armor a bit. Probably an hour is long enough to begin with for the first day. It's pretty stiff."

"Auror Tonks is going to come over after and help me train for an hour. Then I need to go back to Gringotts for a few minutes. Is there any other shopping that you need to do before Christmas? If you need anything, Winky will either get it for you, or help you if she can. There is a jar over in the kitchen for household money. It has Galleons and Sterling. Take whatever you need."

Katie took a steadying breath, charged ahead and asked, "Harry?"

"What?"

"Are you dating anyone?"

With experience comes wisdom, thought Harry. "I have a close relationship with Susan Bones. Hermione has been my best friend since I was eleven. Ginny and I are very close. You're very good friend. Tonks adopted me as a younger brother. Katie, it's pretty hard to think a lot about that dating stuff with a dark wizard that's pretty focused on trying to kill me. I'm not evading your question. Hermione says that I've got a saving people thing. Maybe she's right. I just try and help people when I can, and right some of the wrongs of the world."

She looked into his emerald eyes, smiled and said, "I think I understand better now. Thanks for taking me in, Harry. I really appreciate it."

Harry gave her a hug. "It is my pleasure Katie. You're a good witch."

-

Harry woke up early on the 24th and remembered that Dumbledore would arrive at ten. Harry practiced with his sword then did flexibility exercises for another hour before showering and getting dressed.

He was sitting at the breakfast table reading when Katie came in and sat down. "Hi Harry. Can I make you breakfast?"

Harry smiled at her. "Morning Katie. That would be really nice of you, but Winky's feelings would be badly hurt. How about if you sit down and she'll make us both breakfast? She'll make anything that you like. Anything."

"Harry, this is so cool."

POP. "Good morning Sir and Miss. What would you like for breakfast today?"

"Toast, hash browns and coffee or diet coke please."

"And for you Sir?"

"I'd like the same Winky. Thank you very much."

When she left, Harry handed Katie a small flat jewelry box, and said, "Katie, this is for you."

Misunderstanding Harry completely, Katie said, "Harry, you don't need to keep giving me things."

Harry replied, "This is special. It's from my Godfather. Go ahead, open it."

She opened the Gringotts key case, and looked at him for a moment, too stunned for words. Finally she asked, "What is this?"

“My Godfather was Sirius Black. He spent most of his adult life imprisoned for a crime that he never committed. When he died, he left me some money that I used to set up a victims’ relief fund. I keep hoping that I’ll never have to give out any more of those keys. It is a Gringotts vault key that has been set up in your name. It has some gold in it that can help you along the way. Please accept it.”

Tears were streaming down her cheeks. “Thank you Harry. Thank you for being so kind to me. I don’t know what else to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. It’s not that much. Please don’t give it another thought. I just thought that you could use a hand. Let’s go make some more globes before Professor Dumbledore arrives.

“Why is he coming so early?”

“He just wanted some extra time to visit and to talk about my schedule for the next term. There’s no secrets or anything. You go first.” Harry handed her the globe when he was done and smiled. It was the two of them making globes together.”

Katie extracted the thought that Harry had given her. It was his first year class sparking balloons. She smiled and said, “They talk about your class non-stop at night in the common room. I wish you were my defense teacher. Professor Moody knows his stuff all right, but he gives me the creeps.”

Harry nodded. “He does have that effect on people. I really respect him though.”

Dumbledore walked into the room, saw them making ornaments together and handed Harry a thread. “Good morning Miss Bell. I trust that Mr. Potter is being a good host.”

Katie blushed slightly and replied, “You have no idea Professor. Thank you for making me the portkey so I could come here.”

Harry smiled as he looked at the happy memory that Dumbledore had given him to make the glass ball. It was a second year Harry leading a first year Ginny Weasley into McGonagall’s office after rescuing her

from the chamber of secrets while Molly and Arthur looked on. Dumbledore said, "I apologize sincerely Miss Bell, but I must borrow Mr. Potter for a few minutes to discuss something. We won't be long, I assure you.

"Let's go in the study Professor."

"Thank you Harry. I like the view." Winky popped in carrying a butterbeer and a cocoa on a tray.

Dumbledore started, "Harry the time is rapidly approaching for the torch of leadership for the light side to be passed. It seems to have found you. In the next few months, I'd like you to assume leadership of the Order. You are of course welcome to invite additional members of your choosing."

Harry phrased his response carefully. "I would need to consider it Professor. In all honesty, the Order in total hasn't proved too helpful to me in the past. No offense meant, but Molly and Arthur aren't fighters."

Dumbledore smiled at Harry's point. The Order was poorly suited as a fighting unit. True, there were a few notable exceptions to that statement, but currently it's functioning better as an intelligence organization than a militia. He replied, "An Army is made up of many elements Harry; soldiers, cooks, medics, supply sergeants, spies and a few leaders. Even in your fine defense group, some would be better suited to one role rather than another. Within the Order are people of a like mind and many talents. They would not fail you. You do not have to answer today, but please consider the offer."

Harry knew that Dumbledore was right, but knew that Molly would impede his efforts because of the age difference. It was a problem, but it didn't need to be solved today.

"Harry, I'd like you and the others Apprentices to consider topics that you'd like to learn more about in the next term. You have been exposed to enough of the wizarding world to know what's out there, and should have a say in what additional skills you wish to acquire. Again, you do not need to answer today, and I have kept you from

your arriving guests too long as it is. We can talk again on the evening of the 27th. I will return this evening in time for desert. Enjoy your afternoon, Harry.”

“Thank you, Professor. You too.”

As Dumbledore was leaving, the Grangers, and the others began arriving, carrying brightly wrapped packages, homemade cookies and a half case of champagne. Remus arrived having brought Mundungus along with him. “The streets of London will be safer this evening with Mundungus safely tucked away here, Harry.” They all laughed.

“’Tis not en easy job, being in my line of work, mind ye,” retorted the old scoundrel.

“Happy Christmas, Mr. Fletcher” said Harry, shaking his hand.

Tonks arrived, this time with auburn hair. “Happy Christmas Harry,” she said, giving him a big hug.”

“Happy Christmas to you too, Tonks. I’m glad that you could come. It looks like you’re feeling better.”

She winked at him. “Harry, I’d like you to meet my Dad. Ted Tonks, this is Harry Potter.”

“Good afternoon, sir. I’m very pleased to meet you.”

“The pleasure is mine Mr. Potter. I am profoundly grateful that you took such good care of my daughter. Because of your skill and kindness, I still have family. I am eternally grateful.”

“I was just trying to help. Please call me Harry.”

“Ted, and thank you again.”

“You’re welcome. Dobby will take your coat and Winky will find you a beverage.”

The rest of the guests arrived almost all at once. For an afternoon, they were not at war. For an afternoon, they were neither victims nor training to become soldiers. They played billiards on Harry's table, told stories, laughed and enjoyed each other's company. Harry was happy to see Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet again. They were working with Fred and George and made great couples.

Tonks and her Dad watched as Harry welcomed the different guests. Poppy and Minerva came together. Both seemed genuinely glad to have been included in what was arguably the most sought after Christmas gathering that season. Invitations to fun gatherings hosted by rich, famous, good looking, young, unmarried wizards rarely made their way to seventy five year old school witches. Ted noticed that Harry treated all of his guests with love and respect.

He watched as Harry greeted the odd looking dwarf sized wizard. They appeared to be good friends, smiling and laughing at each other. Next he spent a few minutes with a lithe redhead. She could have been a model. Again, there appeared to be love and respect. He greeted the redhead's mother with equal love.

Harry greeted an overly large man like he was seeing his best friend. Nine feet tall half giants didn't receive many invitations to fashionable parties either, yet Harry made certain that the big man felt right at home.

A teen and a woman that Ted recognized as Nymphadora's manager came in next. They both seemed to know him and there was genuine affection between them.

An odd looking older woman arrived next with an older man with an artificial eye. The old woman looked like a shut in wearing a housedress and pink slippers. Again Harry greeted her like an old friend and made certain that she felt welcomed.

The guests visited for another hour. Harry asked each person there to contribute a few memories for glass memory ornaments.

Dinner was fantastic. Winky had made several roast turkeys, popovers, baked dishes, candied potatoes, vegetables, salads, and

more. Harry sat by Mundungus and Mrs. Figg. They all seemed to enjoy the company.

After dinner they walked the half-mile to attend the Christmas Eve service at the nearby church. Harry enjoyed the peaceful ambiance of the service. While largely unchurched while growing up with the Dursleys, Harry recognized the songs and seemed to enjoy the time.

As they walked back in the light snow, Harry had a chance to visit with Molly and Arthur. They were having a difficult time getting settled into their new home. Harry assumed that they had grown to be so comfortable at the burrow, with a generation of memories of family, that any change would be difficult. In reality, they were probably missing the daily contact with their family more than the quirky house.

Charlie had brought an interesting woman as a guest. Like Charlie, she was highly interested in dragons. Her slant was writing muggle fantasy novels. Her fictionalized but highly realistic descriptions of the dragons and their adventures had won her critical acclaim and quite a following. Little did the muggle world know that she'd received her drawings and information from a man who'd lived it firsthand.

When they got back to Grimmauld Place, Winky had reset the table as a buffet for deserts. Dumbledore arrived carrying a sack full of miniature gifts and placed them under the tree.

The opening of the Christmas gifts was a fun-filled experience. Being the youngest, Ginny selected a gift to open first. Her mum had gotten her a new sewing and knitting kit with patterns for different dresses and jumpers.

Susan had received a pearl necklace from Minerva and Poppy. It looked great on her.

Harry received a pickpocket proof wallet from Mundungus. Moody smiled and asked him if he'd ever had any personal experience with that model. They all laughed.

Hermione received a magical camera from Molly and Arthur.

Katie received a wooden Bokken from Harry. She really liked having one of her own.

Angelina and Alicia opened engagement rings from George and Fred respectively.

Fred and George received new fishing rods from Ginny. She knew that they really enjoyed the relaxing past time.

Charlie's friend Kelly-Jean received a laptop computer from Charlie that she could use to help write her stories.

Charlie received a self-filling bottle of burn salve from Poppy.

Bill received a pocket watch family clock from Molly and Arthur. Whether there was any implied message to go along with it was open to interpretation.

Tonks received a signed weird sisters club shirt from Remus.

Remus opened a collection of piano music from Hermione. She knew that he enjoyed playing.

Emma received a health club membership from Dan. She had come to miss the daily workouts with the witches.

Dan opened a box from Harry that had a miniature set of Titleist golf clubs and a week long pass for four at the Old Course, the New course, Jubilee, Balgrove and a second round on the Old Course at St Andrews. Harry told him that the certificate was good any week in May or June and gave him the name of the person to call and confirm the reservations with. Naturally it came with a certificate for any of the suites at the hotel that Harry owned.

"Hermione can expand them for you any time it would be convenient for you. In the mean time, they would look good on your desk at your surgery."

Dan thanked Harry. He had found a very hard to obtain gift that Dan would really enjoy using.



Ted unwrapped a new motorcycle-riding outfit from Tonks. He had ridden for years, and really did need a new set of leathers.

Molly opened a package from Harry. It had beach blankets, a spa certificate and hotel reservations for a week at a beach resort in Bermuda. Christmas without Ron had been hard on her. She needed a break to get away.

Arthur opened a photo album that Hagrid had put together containing photos of their family and friends. Dan saw the look of extreme appreciation on his friend's face. You couldn't buy photos.

Mundungus received a self-filling bottle of Ogden's from Arthur, who somehow knew that he'd found the perfect gift.

Arabella received a spa certificate from Harry. She needed to have a reason to get out of her house and feel good about herself.

Hagrid received a pair of shih-tzu puppies from Molly who was desperately hoping that he could be broken of his monster fixation. Hagrid would have preferred a Chinese Fireball instead, but thanked his friend, all the same.

Amelia received a framed photo of the Apprentices from Susan.

Minerva and Poppy received tickets to the ballet from Flitwick.

Dumbledore opened a small box from Harry. It was a miniature midnight blue Corvette. "Thank you Harry. This is very interesting."

"I'm hoping that you have many fun afternoons with it Professor. You'll look fabulous driving it." The realization that it wasn't a model hit everyone. Remus smiled at Harry.

Dumbledore was surprised. "Thank you, Harry. I owned an automobile once before in the early twenties. I hope this one is as much fun to operate."

Remus said, "You'll be amazed at the difference Professor."

Dobby and Winky received matching gray outfits from Ginny. They were extremely well made, and they looked cute in them.

They had a fun evening alternating between opening gifts, toasting one another, playing billiards and eating deserts. Harry had found room for everyone, conjuring sleeping bags for the library, and his study. Dumbledore left at midnight to go back to the castle.

Tonks thanked Harry for the dragonhide armor suit. Harry smiled and said, "You'll look great in it Sis."

The apprentices had agreed to exchange gifts the next day. Harry pulled Fred and George aside and asked if they would have an interest in opening another shop. Harry explained that he learned that he owned a building in Hogsmede and a fourth of it was currently unleased and available. The two redheads conferred privately for a minute. Space was almost never available in Hogsmede and it was across the street from the Three Broomsticks that was getting rebuilt. It truly was a prime location.

George came back and said, "Harry we would love to but we don't have the gold to expand right now."

Harry said, "You misunderstood me. You can have the space, in return for keeping an eye on the other shops in the building. If you need capital to launch a second shop, just tell me how much."

Fred said, "That would be fantastic. We'll get Lee to run it on an everyday basis and stop in for the weekends that have the school visits. Thank you Harry."

By now most of the guests had gone to bed. Katie, Angelina and Alicia were sitting on the floor in front of the fireplace in the entertainment room visiting and laughing with each other. Remus was still visiting with Ted Tonks. Bill and Flitwick had left for the evening. Bill would be spending Christmas Day with Fleur and her parents in France.

Harry woke up at three. He was an hour into his stretching exercises when Ginny came in and they began sparing with the wooden swords. By 4:30 Hermione and Susan were there. Harry asked them to practice their disillusion charms. Ten minutes later Tonks and Katie had arrived. Harry asked Tonks to fire some stunners at Katie to test her shields. Five minutes later Katie had been stunned.

Tonks asked, "Harry what's up?"

"I formally challenged McNair to a duel in two days. I'd like all of your help to make sure that it is a fair fight."

Hermione asked, "What would you like us to do?"

"It's a lot to ask. I'd like you to spend the night in some trees. My concern is not fighting McNair, rather getting ambushed by someone else that has arrived an hour early. Moody will be there as the referee. According to the rules there will be no wands, just his ax and my Katana. It would be full battle gear and blood staffs."

"Why trees Harry," asked Tonks. "The reason I ask is once you're in one, if you have an anti-apparation ward in place, your fighting mobility is about zero."

"Let's talk this through. Maybe there's a better idea. Harry diagrammed the area on the whiteboards on one of the walls. "My biggest concern is that one or two people sneak in using an invisibility cloak. We can conjure a few inches of snow so that they would leave tracks as they go and be easier to see. I thought that they'd be easier to see with a bit of elevation. Moody can look for people hiding before it starts, but it will be pretty dark unless we conjure some lights. Back to your question, is there a better place to wait?"

Tonks felt grateful at being asked to help after needing so much herself the last time. "Let's come back to that. What about the playing field? Do you want blacktop, dirt, or snow? What would put McNair at the biggest disadvantage?"

“Ice,” said Hermione. He’d never be able to swing that huge ax properly if he didn’t have good footing.”

“I don’t want to do that,” said Harry. “He’d probably get frustrated, and pull out a spare wand. I can beat him in a fair fight. I’d prefer dry blacktop or dirt. If it snows a bit, so be it.”

“What about broomsticks?” asked Ginny. “Tonks and I are pretty decent flyers. It’s a lot harder to hit a moving target as your first and second years know.”

“It would be really cold,” replied Harry.

“We agree with you on that part Mr. Potter,” said Tonks. “You would be responsible for warming up five half frozen witches after you kick his arse.”

“That would be harder than beating McNair,” said Harry, “but I’d do my best. Back to task. Most witches or wizards can’t hit much at more than a hundred feet away. In most cases it’s closer to about fifty feet. I suggest that one person stands watch in this big tree and two in this one here. They both have big enough branches to safely stand in and remain hidden. You’d be ten to fifteen feet off the ground, so you could jump with a cushioning charm if you needed to. If things get bad, you can use your portkey to get back here.”

Ginny looked at Hermione, then Susan, then Katie and finally to Tonks. They all nodded. “Ginny said, “If there are more than three other Death Eaters, whoever sees them will call out and we will all apparate back. Is there any part of all that is ambiguous to you, Professor Potter?”

Knowing that he was grossly outvoted on the matter, Harry said, “I promise three things; we will win a fair fight, I will not stay and fight a losing battle, and that no one will be left behind. Is that fair?”

Susan said, “That’s fair. Where do you want Madam Pomfrey?”

“Here.”

Tonks asked, do you want any other backup?

“Kingsley, Hestia and Lupin could be here in case we need help, or to take any prisoners to a holding cell. What are your plans with McNair?”

“To repeat a test that this sword had performed 150 years ago.” No one asked about the test cuts that the Hizen swordsmiths had subjected new swords to on cadavers.

“OK,” said Ginny. “Let’s get something to eat then you can give use our gifts, Mr. Potter.”

“The others aren’t up yet. How about a bit of coffee then we can see what there is to be unwrapped.” POP. Winky appeared with four cups of coffee and two diet cokes.

An hour later, they were nearly done unwrapping their lovely things. Susan walked over to Harry and whispered something in his ear. After blushing for a moment, he went to excuse himself and returned a moment later. The four witches helped put a beautiful pair of diamond studs in Katie’s ears.

“They look great on you,” said Hermione.

Sure beats the Dark Mark getting burned into your arm, thought Tonks. Welcome to Harry’s Angels, Katie.

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A/N

Want more? Review or e-mail.

## Chapter 9

Breakfast with all of the guests was a lot of fun. It turned into a champaign brunch. Charlie and his friend KJ amused everyone making numerous glass memory bulbs and telling dragon stories to Dan and Emma who were very good listeners. As it turned out Emma had read several of KJ's books thinking that they were wonderful fantasy novels rather than fictionalized accounts of actual events. Minerva and Poppy had a lot of fun seeing that another of their favorite former students had found a career that they were truly happy with.

Things broke up in the early afternoon. Harry asked Remus to be at his house by 2:00 AM on the 27th. Remus elected not to ask the particulars and respected Harry's request that he not mention it to anyone else. Moody would contact Poppy and ask that she be there by 4:00. He would also contact Kingsley and Hestia, again under the provision that they not mention anything. Tonks agreed to bring two extra sets of anti-apparation manacles in case they needed extra. Harry still had the two sets that Amelia had given him.

The witches and Moody would be there by 2:30 and get into their armor at Harry's house. Harry laid everything out in the training room. Moody would handle the insertion of the witches into position, and charm and ward the area as they had discussed. Hermione would be responsible for conjuring an inch of fresh snow after they arrived there. The only complication that Harry could see would be getting out of the Grangers where he had been invited to spend the evening. Hermione assured him that they would have no problem, but Harry realized that the house was new to her too.

Harry did not sleep very well the evening of the 25th. He had a too many things on his mind. On the morning of the 26th he went to Gringotts where he filed a revised Will before returning home. He was sitting in his library when Dobby came in. "What's is troubling you Harry Potter sir?"

Harry saw no reason to lie and said, "I'm going to fight a bad wizard in a day and a half, and I don't want anyone else to get hurt."

Dobby said, "I's had seen other wizards in my life Harry Potter Sir, and I's only seen one other one that was concerned for others likes you is Sir. Professor Dumbledore was always worried when he's asked other witches and wizards to fight for him. You's not asking people to fight for you Sirs. You's asking them to fight with you. Dobby thinks that makes you the greatest wizard that Dobby's ever known sir."

The little elf came up to Harry and gave him a huge hug. "Please don't gets hurt Sir. Dobby and the Miss witches would be very sad."

"I'll do my best Dobby." Harry had an idea. "Dobby, can you pop through anti-apparation wards?"

"Oh yes, Harry Potter Sir. What would you like Dobby to do?"

"I'd like you to come with me on Friday morning. You wouldn't be seen as a threat to McNair. If any of the witches get hurt, I'd like you to pop back here and get the others who will be waiting here."

"Dobby will do that for Sir."

Harry had another idea. "Dobby, can you see through invisibility cloaks?"

"In the daylight I can sir. My eyesight is not as good as it was when Dobby was a young elf. I's will try very hard Sir. Are's you looking for someone special?"

"Susan and Katie will be in one tree. Hermione will be in the other. They will be hidden. I want you to look around and watch to see that no one else is trying to sneak up on us. If you see anyone I want you to..."

-

Harry forced himself to go lay down by 4:00 PM on Christmas Day. He knew that he would get next to no sleep the next night.

Katie tried to do the same, but was not having much luck. At 7:00 PM she knocked on Harry's door. Harry was lounging on his sofa watching the fire. He heard her knock and crack the door open a moment later and waved her over to come in at her questioning look. He sat up and she sat a comfortable distance away from him.

"I couldn't sleep Harry," she said, as Winky brought in a tray of butterbeers then left.

"Are you scared?" asked Harry.

"Scared really isn't the right word. More like nervous or anxious if you know what I mean."

"Sort of like before a big Quidditch game?"

"I guess. More like before my first Quidditch game, when everything was new. Now I mostly worry about the other players getting hurt."

"I understand," said Harry. "I don't think I slept a wink the night before we grabbed Bulstrode. I knew that we had planned everything that we could but that didn't stop me from being nervous."

"That's the point Harry. You planned everything out. I don't see how anything can go wrong."

Harry smiled darkly. "The Aurors and Hit-Wizards who had set an ambush at the Grangers last summer thought that they had planned everything out. Four minutes into the battle, they were all dead. Dumbledore showed me Hit Wizard Wood's dying memory in his pensive. They were so sure that they were going to ambush the Death Eaters, that they didn't consider that the Death Eaters had plans of their own. They say that you learn from mistakes. I tried to learn from theirs and made adjustments. I assume that they do the same. We don't know how many people McNair has told."

Katie nodded in understanding. "So you're more worried that he told people and they're planning something other than a duel?"



“Basically. I’m worried that he will be sneaking a few in to ambush the fight so to speak.”

“Are you concerned that he’ll beat you?”

“No. I’m concerned that one of you might get hurt or worse.”

Katie touched his arm and said, “Harry, we’re not worried about the possibility that we will be involved in a fight. We’re concerned about the certainty that you will. All I’m asking is that you do your best to get home safely. We’ll do our best to get ourselves home safely too. Is that fair?”

Harry nodded.

“Harry, Ginny came to me this morning and asked me to do anything that I could to make sure that you got a good nights sleep. Is there anything that I can do?”

Harry conjured two extra squashy sleeping bags and pillows. “You can sleep here or in the bed tonight if you’d like. I like to have someone else in the room with me if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Harry, I was prepared to shag your brains out tonight if that’s what you needed. You’re such a gentleman. Can I just lay down on one of the sleeping bags by the fire?”

“You can do that or you can be on the sofa with me if you need to. We really do need to get all of the sleep that we can.”

Katie took off her jumper and jeans. Looking over at Harry she smiled. “Harry, we changed in front of each other for four year in the locker room, and you’re just checking me out now?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...”

“Harry, I’m anxious as everything about Friday, and you’re worried about having taken a look at my bits. You kick McNair’s arse and I’ll show you anything that you ever wanted to see, OK?

“OK, but I’ll save that look until next week. OK?”

Putting on one of Harry’s shirts, she walked over to him and kissed him on the cheek. “OK. Good night Harry. Pleasant dreams.”

“Good night Katie.”

-

Harry slept better and later than he would have expected to. He walked into the bathroom and saw Katie kneeling in front of the toilet. Embarrassed, she got up, and said, “I’m sorry Harry. I was nervous to my stomach.”

“Don’t be sorry,” he said, helping her up and handing her an extra towel. “Almost everyone got sick before or after our first grab this summer. Are you going to be OK? Take a shower. You’ll feel better. I’ll get you something clean to wear.”

“Thanks Harry,” she said. “I’ll be fine. Just get me a jumper, knickers, and a pair of jeans if you don’t mind. Wait. Make that a tee shirt, and my dragonhide. I want to wear it for a bit more this morning.”

“OK. I’ll set everything right outside the door.”

Harry found everything that Katie had asked him for, set them out the door and went upstairs to look at the equipment again. Katie came up twenty minutes later wearing the dragonhide vest and pants. She looked at the four sets of armor, blood staffs broomsticks and Harry’s Katana sword.

“Harry, where did you get the sword?”

“It was in Sirius’s closet. It was made in the Hizen area of Japan about 150 years ago. They were masters at their craft. The Brits and Americans were just about to bring firearms to Japan, but at the time the soldiers or Samurai relied mostly on their swords. Their sword was like an extension of their arm. The blade is still incredibly sharp, though I expect that this particular sword has seen little real use. I say

that because this is the original scabbard and it's in nearly perfect condition."

Setting it back down, Harry said, "I have some others that I would be happy to show you, though another day would be better. Will you be OK here today?"

She nodded. "I'll be fine. I promise to try and get to sleep early. I'll be waiting for you when you get here in the morning. Will you want any breakfast?"

"Loads, but after we get back. Coffee would be great. Go ahead and answer any question that Remus asks you. I wasn't hiding anything from him, I just didn't want to hear from Dumbledore."

"OK."

"I need to get ready to go. There are some interesting books in the library, or some decent DVDs in the entertainment room if you want. People will start coming anytime after midnight. Keep an eye on the weather. You won't be able to use warming charms. They'll give off too much magical signature."

She walked up to him, gave him a bone crushing hug and said, "I can't describe how much this means to me, so I won't try. I meant what I said about my little bits. I'll see you in about fourteen hours."

Harry winked at her and said, "They're not too little, but we can talk about them later if you'd like. I'll see you." He walked out the door, carrying an overnight bag.

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The Granger household was warded such that the third stall in the garage was the only part of the property and the adjacent yard where someone could apparate from. Attempting to apparate into an area that had been warded against apparation typically meant that the person would be half successful and find themselves splinched. Attempting to apparate away from an area that had similarly been so

warded, typically meant that the apparation spell wouldn't be successful.

As further protection, Dan had installed electronic garage door openers so that a witch or wizard that apparated into the garage would be stuck inside the garage unless the door was open. The door openers were inside their BMWs and another one in the house. Hermione had explained that none of the pureblood wizards who would be most likely to want to harm them knew enough technology to ever figure that out. In this case, there was no door from the car park directly into the house, or service door leading out the back of the garage. If they were expecting Hermione or her friends, they would leave the door open.

Knowing this, at 11 AM Harry found himself standing in the empty third stall of the garage with the door open. He walked out the garage and into the front door where Emma greeted him.

"Please come in Harry. It's lovely to see you again."

"Your home looks a lot more finished than the last time that I was here. Everything really looks nice together."

"Thank you Harry. We built our first home when we were in our early twenties. Money was tight and we had to compromise between that we wanted and what we could afford at every step. From that perspective, I have to say that it was a lot more fun doing it twenty years later. Besides, we had a better idea of what we liked and needed this time around. Let me show you to your room."

Harry's room was right next to Hermione's. Both rooms were away from Dan and Emma's. It was a measure of the trust and respect that they had for the young man that had saved their life that they didn't space them apart. Harry felt guilty knowing that he'd be violating that trust in thirteen hours.

Sensing that neither Harry nor Hermione seemed very talkative at the moment, she suggested that they watch a movie in the family room. She went into the kitchen to bake some cookies (biscuits) and left them alone. Hermione asked Harry if everything was ready. He

nodded and rested his head next to hers on the sofa. When Emma returned an hour later, she saw the two of them snoozing next to each other. Smiling to herself, she quietly placed the cookies on the table next to them and went to her study to read.

By amazing coincidence, she was browsing through a wizarding book that she had picked up in Harry's library, *Dueling Tactics against Dirty Duelers*, by Alastor Moody.

She read about the two types of duels commonly used in the wizarding world; either with wands or classical weapons such as swords. A duel may be called due to a real or perceived injury to one's honor or person, or to avenge an injury or death of a loved one or family member.

The rules were formal and reviewed beforehand regarding the curses that were not to be used, and the field of combat. A duel would end based upon an agreed level of injury, death, or the losing dueler calling "I yield." There were no legal penalties placed on dueling or the injuries or death inflicted on an opponent. A wizard or witch injured in a duel had no recourse within the court system unless illegal curses were used.

The challenger selected the weapons, venue and the possible use of seconds and either agreed to or countered by the other person.

The challenger also selected the referee. Tradition dictated that the person selected have some experience in dueling and not be related to either party.

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Harry and Hermione woke up at four PM, smiling to each other that they must have fallen asleep and missed the movie that had been playing. After dinner, they played hearts for a while with Dan and Emma. Harry mentioned that the apprentices should get together on Sunday and talk about the next term curriculums. Hermione shuddered slightly each time she looked at a face card with a sword or an ax.

She wondered what the next months would bring. She truly loved witchcraft and doing the magics. It was the politics that totally confused her. She wasn't surprised that dark witches or wizards emerged from time to time. Many cultures developed mass murderers or lunatics craving power. What surprised her was that those killers so readily found followers.

A 46 year old man named Walden McNair was going to do battle this next morning with a man 30 years younger. To her knowledge, neither had formally met each other. Until last June, McNair held a job within the Ministry leading a double life. She wondered about the 13 years that Voldemort had been gone. Had McNair remained an active killer during those years, or had he spent the time raising a family? Had he delighted or dreaded in feeling the mark burn in his arm after all those years.

She thought about how terrifying it must have been for Harry to be tied to a grave marker watching all of those killers appear. It was no wonder that he occasionally had nightmares. He'd hated that some of his housemates used to tease him about them.

Had McNair tried to murder her and her parents last summer? She supposed so. Harry was sure that he'd been largely responsible for killing Ron and Luna. Poor Katie. Hermione had felt so guilty when she'd learned that Katie's parents had been murdered and no one in the school had done anything for her. Why hadn't Dumbledore told them?

"Your play dear," said Emma. Noting her daughter's introspective mood she said, "Maybe we should finish for the evening. Dan and I need to run errands in the morning. Dan has patients beginning at nine. Why don't the two of you go watch TV for a while. Harry, would you like another coke?"

"Yes please. I'll get it. Hermione would you like one too? I'll get us each one and we can visit for a while. Good night Dan. Goodnight Emma. Thanks again for dinner. It was delicious."

Harry knew that Hermione was a worrier. It was part of what made her such a great person. He also knew that they had done everything that he could to engineer as many of the risks out of the equation.

Sitting on the sofa together he said, "Try to place about an inch of snow for about 200 feet in any direction outside of the dueling circle. If you're more comfortable with your wand than your blood staff you should bring it instead. I'll be OK. I need you to keep an eye out for Susan and Katie."

He continued. "Tonks and Ginny will be flying around the park and should have a good field of vision. Between being disillusioned, the clouds and the time of day, they should be all but invisible." She nodded. Hermione was a great follower, and listened carefully to his instructions. "Dobby will be arriving with me. Moody will be there at 5:30. If anyone comes, I would expect it to be between 5:45 and 6:15."

Fe finished. "Moody will be back at the park at 5:30. This is a legal duel. He'll owl the papers to the Ministry at 5:45 after we sign them. McNair or what's left of him will be portkeyed to the Ministry after we're done. If you see a flock of Death Eaters, use the Cannon Blast charm and everyone will use their portkey to get back to Grimmauld Place. I know you'll be fine. We'll get back here in time for your mum to make us a fantastic breakfast."

Hermione was comforted by his confidence, but only slightly. "Harry, please hold me for a few minutes before we leave. No. Please hold me properly." She took off her jumper. "That's better. Thanks for everything that you've ever done for me Harry. You mean the world to me." She moved his hand to a more comfortable spot. It was very intimate, but it wasn't overly sexual. For half an hour, they were two best friends helping each other. She knew that she loved him. She knew that he currently loved Ginny and was willing to be patient.

Harry knew her feelings for him and knew that someday things would need to get sorted out with the witches. Harry knew that today was not the time for those conversations. "You've always stood by me Hermione. Thank you." They held each other in comfortable silence for a few more minutes, before Harry said, "It's time to go."

Hermione pulled her jumper back on and said, "I need to go get my wand and my coat. I'll be back in a moment."

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They arrived at Grimmauld Place at 2:00. Remus was there waiting for them. Harry filled him in for a few minutes on what they were doing and the logistics before going to get dressed. He quickly showered and put on a blue Oxford shirt over his vest. He put on his dragonhide pants and his Doctor Martins. They had great grip soles so he wouldn't slip. He wore his wand holster. He wouldn't wear a coat, instead would use a warming charm. Dobby would bring a jacket for him.

Moody arrived next, followed shortly by the witches. Harry gave each of the witches a hug and a kiss before they left at 3:00. The temperature was just below freezing and there was a light snow. Moody conjured four lamp posts and placed them 25 feet away from the outside of the circle. They would illuminate the area for 150 feet in and direction, giving the witches the opportunity to see any tracks. Tonks and Ginny would be in the air periodically until 5:15 when they would continuously float in a slow parameter from about 400 feet.

Hestia and Kingsley arrived at 4:30. By then Moody had returned. Poppy gave Harry a disappointed look when she found out what was going on. She talked quietly with Remus for a while. He reminded her that the order was waging the war while the teens were fighting it.

Harry went upstairs and strapped on his sword.

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Narcissa Black Malfoy was preparing to have a day of reckoning. She planned to put down the boy that had caused her family so much trouble. She would accompany that oaf McNair to the duel with the Potter boy. She could hardly believe McNair when he told her that Potter had challenged him to a duel using blade weapons. McNair had spent years honing his skill with the larger killing ax. The arrogance of the boy to even make such a move was incredible.



Severus had been right. He was an insolent brat, brought up and coddled by muggles and Dumbledore alike.

Narcissa was secretly bringing three new recruits along; Anthony Betchley, Michael Bole and Adrian Pucey. They had been in Slytherin house a few years ahead of Draco, and had right-minded families. She didn't know any of them personally, but their skill wouldn't be brought to bear today. Potter would probably already be quartered before they got there.

McNair didn't know that the other three were coming. He arrived with Narcissa at the site of the old Dursley home. McNair began walking the quarter mile to the park. Narcissa told him that she would follow five minutes behind him. A few minutes after McNair left, the three others arrived. Betchley and Bole had borrowed invisibility cloaks. Narcissa and Pucey disillusioned themselves. They split into two groups and began their walk to the park. Narcissa and Pucey from the south and the others from the west side.

McNair saw Moody and Potter waiting as he arrived. As he got closer he noticed that Potter had brought along his house elf. McNair acknowledged Moody who pointed him to the table with the dueling release document. He signed the document, and then Moody countersigned it and attached it to Hedwig's leg to take to Amelia Bones. They each laid their wands on the table. With his magical eye, Moody looked to see that McNair wasn't carrying any other wands or weapons.

Moody began reviewing the rules with both of them. He drew a magical parameter circle line much the same as the age line that Dumbledore had used for the tri-wizard tournament years before. Like the age line, the parameter circle would keep either of the duelers from leaving the circle until it had been removed. The duelers would stand at opposite sides of the circle until Moody who was outside the circle told them to begin.

It was 6:05.

"If you two are ready, we can begin." Harry unsheathed his sword and handed the wooden scabbard to Dobby. They each entered the circle.

McNair had nearly 100 pounds on Harry who was unable to tell how much was flab and how much was muscle. Harry could tell that McNair had very muscular arms. As McNair took off his jacket, there was no indication that he was wearing any armor. He was wearing corduroy trousers and a wool cable knit jumper.

They stared at each other for a half minute. Moody nodded at Dobby who backed away a few steps. McNair growled, "No tricks Potter. I aim to cut you fair and square."

Harry looked him in the eye and said evenly, "We'll see who cuts whom, McNair."

"Let's start this, Moody," said McNair.

Dobby had seen the four Death Eaters approaching when they were about 200 yards away. He faced the first group and began tugging on his ear. A few seconds later he faced the second group and tugged on his ear again.

"Begin."

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A/N

Please review. If you send an email or have a question and your profile has a valid e-mail, I will respond. I like hearing from you.

O-C

## Chapter 10

Harry moved to the center position before McNair did. He wanted as much room as possible to back away, if needed. McNair's execution ax was about five feet long from the bottom of the handle to the top edge of the dinner plate size head. Based on how McNair held it Harry estimated that McNair had about a 14 inch advantage in reach over his sword. Harry hoped to catch McNair after he'd swung and (hopefully) missed.

"Yer fancy pants won't help ya when I cut yer head off, Potter."

"Go for it McNair. Maybe you'll get the chance. Maybe your arms will be on the ground before the rest of you."

McNair swung from his right to left. Harry had an easier time dodging than he expected to. He nicked McNair's right cheek with the tip of his sword before the bigger man recovered his position.

"Ya little shite." He advanced on Harry and swung again. He connected with Harry, but with the flat side of the head to the ribs. Harry was knocked several feet, and momentarily went down. His side hurt like hell. He knew that he had two or three broken ribs. In an instant, Harry forced himself back on his feet again.

McNair swung again, this time a clean miss. Harry nicked his right trouser leg, cutting more of the cloth than anything else. McNair reached the center of the circle and began backing Harry up a few paces.

-

Tonks and Ginny noticed the disillusioned Death Eaters approaching from the west side of the park. Susan and Katie noticed the disembodied tracks being made from the south. In both cases they stopped about 200 feet from Harry, most likely out of their range of accuracy.

The witches slowly hovered in the air, holding their position and elevation. Katie whispered to Susan, "We could probably stun them from here if we took careful aim."

Susan shook her head, and said, "Not yet."

Meanwhile Hermione had seen the first group that Tonks and Ginny had. She didn't have an easy shot yet and waited.

-

McNair had swung at Harry nearly a dozen times now. After the disastrous hit that Harry had taken with his second swing, McNair hadn't really been very close. Harry moved a foot closer. He was easily within McNair's reach. Harry saw him choke down on the handle, looking to make the power swing. Harry allowed his attention to flicker to Moody for just a moment and McNair struck. As he started the right to left swing, Harry took a big step back. McNair cleanly missed and was badly out of position. Harry swung as hard as he could. With a downward diagonal chop, the Hizen sword maker's skill at their craft was proven. Harry's blow sliced nearly sixteen inches diagonally through the Death Eater beginning at the right clavicle nearly through the left lung.

Blood was everywhere. McNair's ax fell to the ground with a clang as it slipped from his still hand. As Harry bent over to pull his sword from the dead man, Katie yelled "Duck."

Tonks and Ginny fired at the same time, both hitting Pucey. Susan and Hermione hit Betchley as Katie hit Bole a second later.

Narcissa fired a shot as she apparated away.

Tonks dived to the still disillusioned Death Eater, and restunned him. Then she tapped him with her wand to make him reappear.

Moody ran to the other two as Susan and the others climbed out of the tree. Hermione and the others restunned the downed Death Eaters several times.

Harry screamed, "Dobby." The little elf was lying on the ground.

-

Meanwhile at Grimmauld place things were tense. The waiting was nearly unbearable. Suddenly Susan came crashing through the door. "Madam Pomfrey, everybody, come quick."

They grabbed their things and were out of the house within fifteen seconds.

Pop, Pop, pop, POP. They arrived at the park. Tonks was by one prisoner, placing manacles on him. Hermione and Katie were by the others, holding their wands over them. Moody was checking on the body of McNair. Harry was covered in blood, holding his little friend.

By a lucky shot, Narcissa had hit Dobby in the left forearm with a Reducto blast. His little arm was nearly severed. Pomfrey thought that she'd come prepared, but this was outside the scope of anything that she had brought. Susan immediately went back to the house to get Winky.

As Poppy was trying to stop the bleeding and Harry was holding him, Winky popped back. She cast her hand over her mate several times and the bleeding stopped. She changed motions and the tissue began to regrow itself. Within five minutes the unconscious elf looked better!

Moody signed the witness paper and handed it to Harry. "Nice work Potter. Get back to your home and have Pomfrey take a look at you. I'll clean up here." Harry picked up his sword, staff and scabbard then apparated home.

He opened the door and winced at the pain. In reality, he could hardly stand.

Kingsley and Hestia took the three Death Eaters back to the holding cells. Moody came by the cells a few minutes later with the bled out remains of Walden McNair. Moody had given Susan and Katie Betchley and Bole's invisibility cloaks as spoils of battle. Tonks and

Ginny took a last look around the area, and left after using several charms to vanish the pool of blood.

-

Poppy shook her head at her favorite patient and said, "Harry, you and I are going to have a long, unpleasant talk when you get back to the castle next week. Let's go up in your room so you can have a bit of privacy, and I can take a proper look at you."

Knowing better than to argue with such a well-meaning woman, Harry simply replied, "Yes Ma'am."

"I suppose that you'll tell me what happened?"

"I was hit with an ax.

She shook her head. "Please tell me that I heard you wrong."

"No, you heard me right. How bad is it?"

"To answer your question, I think you should look at this. She showed him his vest with a four inch slice missing from along the side. "Harry, if that had been your skin, I'd be preparing your body for a memorial service right now. Why did you do this?"

"McNair had tried to kill Hermione and her parents. He did kill Ron and Luna, and he killed Katie Bell's parents. I had a fairly safe opportunity to remove his threat, weighed the odds, planned very carefully and executed the plan. As a result, with the loss of one 1,500 Galleon armor vest, I helped take four Death Eaters off of the street in one morning. Madam Pomfrey, I'm not asking that you agree with my actions. I know that they go against everything that you stand for, but I am profoundly grateful that you were there for me today."

She kissed his forehead and said, "Let me fix you up for now. Like I said, you are up for a very unpleasant evening next week. For now, I'm grateful for the things that you've done and delighted to be scolding you. Drink this, and hold that to your side for another five

minutes before you get dressed. Who would you like me to call in to help you?"

"Anyone who is available. Thank you again. How is Dobby?"

"You're welcome. I will send you a bill later. Dobby is as good as new. It appears that as long as their limbs are not completely severed, and they don't bleed out, that one elf can largely heal another. I'll get one of your friends to help you get dressed."

A minute later, Ginny came in. Knowing that he was hurt, she elected not to give him the usual bone-crushing hug. Instead, she helped him into the shower, and handed him clean clothes when he got out. As he was getting dressed, Hermione came in, having changed back into her jumper and jeans from the night before and said, "Harry, we need to get going."

Harry nodded and told Ginny that he would see her in the morning. As he walked down stairs, Moody had returned, and told him that he'd take care of the details later that morning.

Harry thanked everyone, and ten minutes later they were gone. Harry looked in on Dobby and Winky, told them that he would be back later that morning, then he walked outside with Hermione to apparate back to her parents' house. Harry looked at his watch. It was 7:45.

-

Opening the door to the house they found an angry looking Emma waiting at the kitchen table. "Harry, where were you and Hermione this morning? Your beds weren't slept in last night."

-

## Chapter 11

Hermione went for the shock explanation. "Harry was in a swordfight with the guy who burned down the Weasley's home."

Dumfounded for a moment, Emma replied, "Harry, why couldn't you have been sneaking off making love with my daughter like a normal teenager? Can't someone else save the wizarding world this week?"

There was silence for a moment regarding what had just been said and left unsaid.

"Mum," said a crimson-faced Hermione. How could she say that?

Emma realized that this probably wasn't the time for a parental lecture and said, "It's all right dears. Harry we love you like a son. I know that Hermione loves you very much as well. Please be careful. Who am I kidding? Tell me what happened..."

-

Fifteen minutes later Harry asked, "Just out of curiosity Emma, How did you know that we'd left?"

The motion detectors that we installed in the garage went off at 2:00. Since the garage door was opened at 2:00 and closed again at 2:01, we presumed that the two of you had left to go snogging someplace. We got a little concerned and tried to call your cell phone, but you'd left it in your overnight bag. I noticed that your bed hadn't been slept in, and we got worried."

Harry didn't know what to say, and said nothing.

Emma continued, "Harry, it's not my place to tell you to do or not to do dangerous things. I know that you are careful, but please leave me a note, or better still, tell me what you're doing. I know I'm not your mother, but I'd like to be your mum. You're not too old for one."

"Thanks Emma." Harry had tears in his eyes.



“Go sit on the couch and hold each other for a few minutes. Hermione is shaking and needs you. I’ll get you both some breakfast. Dan had to leave already.”

Breakfast tasted very good to Harry. Hermione had a few bites before she went to the bathroom and threw up. Harry went to check on his friend. Seeing him at the bathroom door she whimpered, “Harry, I saw your shirt covered in blood and I was so scared that you’d been badly hurt. I’m a mess.”

Harry sat on the slate floor next to his friend and held her in her vomit soaked jumper. “We’re fine Hermione. You were so brave this morning. It must have felt like forever waiting out there by yourself.”

She began sobbing into his shoulder.

“I didn’t want to be in a tree by myself. Why did you do that to me?”

Harry gently rocked his friend. “I knew that you were the strongest. I knew that you would take care of everyone. I knew that you would watch out for me. Your snow was perfect. It even crunched when I walked on it. I’m so proud of you.” Harry could feel his healing energy flow into his friend.

Five minutes later, he felt that she was asleep in his arms. He levitated her to her bed, cleaned her jumper and covered her up.

He closed her door and told Emma, “She’s fine. She’ll wake up in an hour.”

They went back to the kitchen. Emma poured Harry some more coffee and asked, “He’s really gone then?”

“McNair?”

“The man who burned down my home?”

“Yes.”

Emma took a shallow breath and whispered, "Harry, I feel light headed. Would you help me to my room?"

Harry hugged her. "This will help." After a few minutes, he walked her to her room. She did feel better. "You'll feel fine in ten minutes. I'll clean up a bit."

Harry cleaned up the mess in the bathroom and straightened up the kitchen.

Fifteen minutes later, Emma was back, looking much better. She found him sitting on the sofa. She asked, "Harry, what did you just do to me?"

Harry smiled at her and replied, "I transferred a bit of healing energy into you. Do you feel better?"

"Never better." In truth, she felt like she was seventeen.

After a few minutes of comfortable silence, she said, "I know that she loves you, and I know that your life is very complicated right now. I just want you to know that you'll always have a place in our home and in our hearts."

"Thank you Emma."

A few minutes later, Hermione walked back into the room. She gave her mum a big hug. "I should have told you where we were going. I'm sorry."

Emma held her daughter then held her other arm out to include Harry. "I love you both. You don't have to share every detail, but I'd like to be informed of the generalities before hand. So who was your Second?"

Harry knew where his friend got her inquisitive nature from. "Hermione can tell you every detail. I need to leave now. Thanks again for having me. I promise to stay put the next time I come for a visit. Hermione, I'll see you Sunday afternoon by three."

They both hugged him again.

“Bye Harry.”

-

Harry apparated home. Remus and Katie were there.

Remus told him that Moody had been in and out a few times. “Why didn’t you tell me earlier Harry? I would have wanted to help.”

“You did help. I kept the big guns in reserve, knowing that I could absolutely count on you. I really didn’t want to get the Ministry involved if I didn’t have to.”

Remus frowned at his friend. “I know when I’m being pacified, but thanks anyway. I was happy to help, if even a bit. What’s next?”

“I need to get my vest replaced.”

For a moment Remus forgot his own wealth and said, “I saw it. You don’t think it can be mended?”

Harry shook his head. “No. It would never be as strong, and that more or less defeats the purpose. I’ll bring it back to the shop. The shopkeeper will probably think it’s a good souvenir.”

Remus laughed. “A souvenir? Harry Potter’s battle vest? She’ll probably sell it and make a fortune.”

Harry grinned. “That’s fine with me. She seemed like a nice witch.”

Remus smiled and shook his head. “Harry, you’ve got enough nice witches on your hands right now. Are you sure you aren’t related to Sirius?”

Harry said somewhat defensively, “We take care of each other. There’s no cause to worry about anything else.”

Remus wondered at that statement, but let it go.

Harry said, "We should go now. I'll go find Katie and see if she wants to come with."

Harry walked up the stairs to the training room. Suddenly the pain in his forehead was nearly blinding. He sat down to avoid falling over. A minute later, he retched. Katie heard the noise and came over to hold him. "Harry, are you OK?"

Harry nodded and let himself drift in her warm grasp for a minute. She had one arm around him and was absently stroking his hair with the other.

Remus came up to see what the disturbance was. Harry said, "Voldemort must have found out about the duel. He's really angry."

Katie looked bewildered. "How do you know?"

Harry said, "We have this weird connection though my curse scar." She turned his head slightly in her arms and looked at it. His scar was bright red, like a fresh scar. She kissed it several times and moved Harry's hand to a better place.

Remus excuse himself.

-

A half hour later, Harry came back down into the kitchen, having showered again and dressed. Katie and Remus were there. Remus was having tea and Katie had diet coke.

"Ready to go?" asked Harry.

They both jumped, surprised that he was there. Katie said, "I thought you'd be in bed all day. You looked so tired."

Remus added, "Maybe we should take a portkey if you're tired Harry."

Harry replied, "I'll just have a butterbeer for a minute while you finish your tea, and I'll be fine. How is Dobby?"

Remus said, "Winky has him in bed for the day. You should go see him for a minute, then we can go."

Harry knocked in Dobby and Winky's door. Winky answered. "Is you OK, master Potter?"

Harry smiled, "I'm fine Winky. I came to see how you and Dobby are doing?"

"I is fine, Harry Potter sir. Dobby will be up again by dinner time."

Harry shook his head. "You rest today, both of you. Remus and Katie can fend for themselves, and I'm going to the Weasleys for the evening. We're going to Diagon alley now. Can I get either of you anything?"

Winky said, "We is fine master Harry. You runs along now."

Harry asked, "Dobby, How many Death Eaters were there?"

Dobby said, "Five sir. There was the man that you was fighting with the three wizards and bad old Mistress."

"Narcissa Malfoy?"

Dobby shuddered. "It was she, sir. She saw Dobby."

Harry smiled at his quirky little friends. "Thank you both. I'm really glad that you both are here with me. I really appreciate everything that you both do. Thank you." He bent over and gave them both a hug before leaving.

-

At the armor shop, the proprietor was very happy to see Harry. Apparently news of the duel had reached her. She had already sewn a replacement vest for Harry. As Remus had expected, she was delighted to receive the old vest back. As Harry insisted on paying her for the replacement, a crowd began to gather outside. Harry

asked Remus to leave first, telling him that he would meet him in Gringotts in ten minutes.

Remus did as he was told. Ten minutes later a green-eyed man who looked remarkably like Bill Weasley tapped him on the shoulder. Remus turned around to say hi as the man put his hood up over his head. Thirty seconds later the man seemed to shrink a bit, and removed his hood. Remus could hardly believe his eyes. "Harry?"

"What did you think Tonks and I were doing all alone in her room all summer?" Before Remus could answer, Harry said "Never mind. Don't answer that. I'd prefer not to know. Shall we go?"

"Yes. Katie will be done in a minute."

A few minutes she came back from her vault. There were tears in her eyes. Remus asked "What's up, Katie?"

In a louder voice than she probably intended she said, "A week ago I had 46 Galleons in my vault. Now I have 50, 091 Galleons plus the 20 that I just took out! Harry you said that you had put a little bit in there when you handed me that key. In the first place, the vault is huge. I had no idea that they even came so big. My parent's vault looked like a shoebox compare to this."

The Gringotts Head Goblin came over with four guards. "Is this witch bothering you Mr. Potter. I can have her removed immediately if she is causing you any problems."

Harry shook his head. "Everything is fine Ragnot. Could I possibly borrow one of your meeting rooms for a few minutes?"

"Of course, Mr. Potter. Every service and facility of Gringotts is at your disposal. Right this way."

Katie looked shocked, amazed, and a bit frightened at what she had just seen. "Harry?"

He held her hand for a moment. "Let's talk for a minute. Please follow me. Remus. We'll be right back."

Ragnot opened the door for them, asked Harry if he needed anything and closed the door behind him as he left.

“Harry,” asked Katie, “What’s going on?”

“Everything is fine Katie. I tried to transfer the money to your vault, but I guess you needed a bit bigger one. I meant what I said. It was meant for you. My Godfather left me some money when he was killed. It turned out that I already had enough, so I set up the Sirius Black memorial trust to help make the lives of the families of Voldemort’s victims a bit easier. The money is yours. There are no strings or conditions attached. I just was trying to make your life a little easier.”

“Oh.” Harry wiped the tears away from her eyes. She was silent for a minute, and then said, “Thank you Harry. I really appreciate it. I really do. Maybe we should get going now.”

“OK. Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I’m fine. Thanks again.”

“No worries. Let’s get Remus and go home.”

-

Harry arrived at the Weasleys new home at noon on the 27th. He brought his staff in case Ginny wanted to practice anything and his overnight bag. He was greeted at the door by Charlie and his girlfriend, KJ. She gave him a hug and said hello to him.

Harry smiled at her as a fist landed on his jaw. Charlie demanded, “What the hell do you think you’re doing getting my sister involved with four Death Eaters? I would kick your arse all around the house, except to be honest; you scare the crap out of me. You cut a man in two? Harry, that is scary.”

Regaining some feeling in his face, Harry held out his hand. “Charlie stop,” he said imperiously. “Let me put my things away, and I’ll talk

with you all afternoon if you want. KJ, it's nice to see you again, even if I'm seeing two of you."

She smiled at him. "Thank you Harry. Charlie, that was really mean of you. Take Harry's things to his room." Charlie picked up Harry's things and skulked off.

Ginny ran up to Harry, leapt and wrapped her legs around his waist, as she put him in a crushing hug. "Harry, I've missed you."

"I'm happy to see you too, Ginny." His ribs were still very sore, but he tried not to show it.

She whispered in his ear, "Not as happy as you'll be when I get you alone." She kissed his nose. "Mum and Dad are pretty mad. You saw Charlie. The others aren't home. Dad came home from work about an hour ago. He said that Director Bones will be here in an hour. Let's go get some lunch."

Molly and Arthur were in the kitchen. They did not look happy. Arthur said, "Harry, I know we've had this discussion before, but is it necessary to take Ginny along on all of these adventures of yours?"

Charlie came in the kitchen looking like he wanted another piece of Harry.

Harry asked, "Mr. Weasley, do you know what really happened today?"

Arthur honestly didn't know. He replied, "Harry I was notified at work about 9:00 that four Death Eaters had been brought in and some how you and Ginny were involved. Ginny wouldn't tell us, other than to say to wait for you. Would you please tell me what happened?"

Harry said, "I will, but I don't want the information to leave this room. You have a right to know, but will you in turn respect my terms?" Arthur nodded. Harry looked at Molly who in turn nodded, and finally at Charlie. He looked Harry in the eye for about ten seconds then nodded.



Harry started. "Three days ago, I challenged Walden McNair to a duel using traditional weapons. I had found out that he was responsible for the murders of Ron and Luna, Katie Bell's parents, as well as some of the Aurors who died at the Grangers, and I wanted to get him off the streets."

Molly looked shocked. Arthur had his head down, and didn't say anything.

Harry continued. "He accepted, and I made the arrangements for a legal duel. I had Katie, the other three apprentices, several Order members and several Aurors in different places as backups in case anyone tried to sneak up on me while we were dueling. While I was fighting, four Death Eaters arrived. After I finished McNair, they attacked. Ginny and the others were able to stun three of them, but the fourth one got away. Dobby was injured, but with Winky's help, he's as good as new."

No one said anything for a moment. Finally KJ said, "So basically, you just punched out the man who avenged your brother. Charlie, you're such an arse." She walked out of the kitchen.

Charlie was silent for a moment, then said, "Harry, I'd only heard half of the story. I am truly sorry, and profoundly grateful that you had the courage to put down that dog." He held out his hand to Harry, who took it and pulled his dead friend's brother into a hug.

Harry said, "No apologies needed, Charlie. Next time, I need a backup, I'll call you. Merlin, I'm still seeing double."

Molly said, "Maybe you should lay down for a bit and rest Harry. I'm certain that you will need to tell your story at least one other time this afternoon."

"I'll help him," said Ginny. Molly smiled to herself.

-

A/N

Prisoner of the Darkness – Please e-mail me. I would like some advice on the fight scene that you mentioned. I have no experience with that weapon and would be happy to revise it..

## Chapter 12

Voldemort was enraged when he heard of the death of McNair and the other three. McNair had not told him that he had been handed a chance to kill or maim the Potter boy.

Maybe he needed to change his thinking. Regardless of what had happened to the others, the fact remained that Potter defeated an experienced assassin in a fair fight.

Narcissa had made herself scarce that day, and did not arrive at Riddle Manor until three. The Ministry official who had been foolish enough to break the news was crumpled in a heap in the corner of the room.

Narcissa never mentioned being in the park that morning. She never mentioned leading the new recruits to the park, and miraculously, she wasn't asked anything about it. Voldemort simply told her, "McNair will not be joining you tonight, Narcissa. The others will be there at two AM. Attack as soon as you can, and return immediately. Don't expose yourself to capture. Just launch the attack and leave the killing to the others."

"Yes, my lord. Thank you for the opportunity. May I take my leave now to prepare?"

"Yes. Do not fail me, Narcissa."

"I won't my lord. Thank you."

-

Harry woke about an hour after Ginny had led him to one of the extra rooms at the Weasleys. He could hear her breathing sitting on the chair at the desk reading, and was comforted by her presence. He recalled why his head had hurt when he had been led upstairs. Charlie seemed to share that trait with Ron – See or hear something, act, think last. Maybe it was a protective brother thing, Harry didn't know. The fact of the matter was, Harry would hold Ginny up in a fight against any of the Weasleys without hesitation. She had done her

part brilliantly. It was bad luck that both she and Tonks had stunned Pucey.

Harry would review their memories of the events with them in his pensive. Unlike the grabs that they had done in the past, they each had unique responsibilities and fought individual battles this morning.

Hunger was getting the better of him. He hadn't had much breakfast, and had missed lunch. Opening his eyes, he said, "Hi Gin. Thanks for waiting with me. I feel a lot better. Can we try getting something to eat again, or do I need to put on my armor?"

"Hi sleepy. Let's go find out." She leaned over the bed and kissed his forehead. She was expecting the side of his face to be black and blue. She looked at it carefully. It looked to be as beautiful as ever.

"What?"

"Your face healed itself."

"If you gave it another kiss, I'm certain it would feel even better."

"We need to get up now. Director Bones came a few minutes ago. I'll make you feel a lot better tonight."

They went downstairs into the kitchen. Amelia was waiting. "Hello Harry. Are you all right?"

"Much better now, thanks."

She didn't seem to be angry or upset like Molly had. "I read Auror Tonks report and have talked with Moody. Everything seems to be in order regarding the parameter security. I must commend you on the thoroughness of your planning. I also need to give this to you. By the rules of engagement, it would rightfully belong to Susan, but I don't want her to have it. Please do with it as you think best."

Harry looked in the shopping bag that Bones had brought. It was one of the invisibility cloaks.

She continued. "That was a brilliant idea laying a fresh snowfall around the area to see any tracks. I understand that the other side only got one shot off."

Harry replied, "Two actually. Someone had cast the killing curse at me. Katie saw it and yelled at me to duck. At that time, each of the witches must have cast at their target. Everyone went down except Narcissa Malfoy. She fired a Reducto charm at us. It hit Dobby, and he was hurt pretty badly. Susan had apparated back to my home to bring all of the backup team and Healer Pomfrey. She had the presence of mind to go back a second later and get Winky, who was able to heal Dobby."

Amelia thought for a moment and asked, "Would you have done anything differently if you had to do it again?"

"Strategically or against McNair?"

"Both. Start with either one."

Harry said, "The plan worked well enough. Moody was a good choice as referee. He checked McNair to be certain that he wasn't carrying any other weapons. Apparently McNair did everything that he could to make certain that it would be a legal duel. I'm not positive that he even knew that the others had come along. Regarding the duel, I'd need to watch it again in my pensive to know for sure. He did hit me once with his ax head. I broke a few ribs early in the duel."

Amelia nodded. "Hopefully you can relax for the rest of your holiday. I also have this for you. It was the shrunken version of McNair's execution ax. Harry didn't especially want it, but accepted it."

"Miss Weasley, are your recollections consistent with Mr. Potter's?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"Would you have done anything differently?"

"I'd have worn warmer clothing."

Smiling, Amelia asked, "Why didn't you just do a warming charm on yourself?"

Ginny replied, "We wanted to minimize the magical signatures, so no one used any."

Impressed, Amelia asked, "Why had your elf come along, Mr. Potter? It isn't customary to bring a house elf to a duel."

Harry said, "I knew that. Dobby could see through invisibility cloaks and I didn't think that McNair would see him as a threat."

Ginny added, "Actually, he pointed the Death Eaters out during the duel. We had already seen our group. I don't know when the ground team saw the others."

Amelia thought for a moment and said, "I can only say what I am deeply impressed at the level of planning and execution that you all did. Please enjoy your day. I look forward to seeing you again tomorrow. Thank you for the tea, Molly. Here are your anti-apparation maniacals back Harry." She left, leaving Molly, Arthur, Charlie and KJ speechless.

Ginny broke the silence. "Mum, could Harry and I get something to eat? We're starving."

Lifted back into the role that she did best, Molly said, "Of course dears. What would you like?"

Harry smiled, and said, "Anything that you make is perfect, Mrs. Weasley. I've missed having a meal that you've made for so long."

Charlie said, "I truly apologize Harry and Ginny. I had no idea that this was so well thought out. I never could have set something like that up. It sounded bloody brilliant."

Arthur admitted, "I thought the armor that you'd bought everyone was a bit excessive. I stand corrected."

Harry said, "It really worked. I got a new set today."

Charlie asked, "What armor?"

"Body armor. Horntail actually."

Charlie said, "That stuff must have cost a fortune."

Harry replied, "Charlie, to tell you the truth, I've got one, so I might as well use it. Let's talk about something else. KJ, how is your sixth book coming?"

"It should be out in July. I particularly like the part where..."

-

After dinner, Harry and Ginny were in the family room playing chess when Arthur came in. "Harry, I was wondering if I might have a word with you. Ginny, your mother is looking for you."

Ginny grumbled a bit, but left anyway.

Arthur said, "Harry please tell me exactly what happened."

Not having the right words to use, Harry said, "I would be happy to share my memory of the event. Let me get my pensive. I'll be right back". He went to his room, and pulled the shrunken solicitor's pensive out of his bag. As he was setting it up, Harry said, "Perhaps you'd want to bring in the rest of your family, Mr. Weasley. It's your choice, but I believe they have the right to see it if they wish."

Charlie, KJ and Ginny elected to. Molly said that she'd rather not.

Harry started his memory of the actual duel from the point then Moody said "Begin" with both sight and sound. Everyone winced when Harry has hit in the side with McNair's ax knocking him down. They cringed moments later when he was missed by mere inches by the big blade.

Molly ran down the hall and threw up moments after Harry pulled his sword out of the cleaved body of McNair. She had been watching from the doorway.

KJ and Ginny had tears in their eyes and hugged their boyfriends. Arthur was silent for several minutes. Finally he said, "Thank you Harry. Our family could never begin to repay you. Thank you for showing us what happened. It wasn't pleasant to watch, and I'm certain that it was absolutely horrible to experience, but it brought a lot of closure for our family."

He continued. "Ginny, I'd always hoped that my sons and daughter would never have to go into battle. I'm saddened, but so very proud of you my darling daughter. You're also a brave warrior. It's hard for a father to see their little girl grow up, but I'm so proud of you. I know that it's hard for her to say it, but I know that Molly is proud of you too."

He finished. "Charlie, we are so proud of you too. It makes a parent very happy to know that their son or daughter is doing something that they love." Charlie and KJ looked at him, nodded and smiled.

Molly came back a few minutes later. She sat down and Ginny sat by her. Ginny gave her mum a big hug and said, "I love you mum. I'm so glad that you're my mum. Daddy, I love you too. I know a lot of these things seem scary, but someone needs to do them."

For a few moments, peace and calm prevailed over the Weasley household.

-

At eight, Molly, Arthur and Charlie left to go to an Order meeting. Dumbledore had called it to advise the Order members of the duel. Alastor, Remus, Molly, Arthur, Kingsley, Hestia, and Tonks said nothing as Dumbledore explained that Harry had filed legal dueling papers and had somehow defeated McNair. He indicated that three Death Eaters had attempted to infiltrate the duel, and were captured in the process.



Those that were there wondered how Dumbledore had learned what he had, and what percentage of what he had learned was actually being passed along.

The other question on most of their minds was why hadn't Harry (and the others) been invited to tell their own story, or more realistically, why weren't they already part of the group. Again McGonagall asked herself, Would he even have us?

Remus glanced around the room and ascertained that Dumbledore likely got his information from Poppy, Bones or someone in the Ministry. He correctly guessed that his source was someone else within the Ministry, as most of the information seemed to be about the prisoners themselves and grew sketchier as to how they got there. He didn't seem to be aware that there was a fourth Death Eater attempting to infiltrate and that they had gotten away.

Remus himself was unaware of the identity of the fourth Death Eater. Dobby had only told Harry, who hadn't mentioned the details to anyone.

Dumbledore guessed but did not know that Harry had received help from Remus and Tonks. He hadn't considered that Kingsley, Hestia, and Poppy had also been involved. Moody had simply left his answer to Dumbledore's questions as, "It was a private matter that Potter had arranged."

As Poppy was sitting there with Minerva, Remus' words kept coming back to her, Dumbledore is waging the war, the teens are fighting it. She had originally had every intention of giving Potter the lecture of his life when she saw him next week. The realization occurred to her that he was one of the very few people who was proactively fighting it. She had some understanding of his involvement in the captures over the summer. She didn't know if he'd done anything beyond the times when she'd been hired to be a backup. In truth, she felt that she'd made a larger contribution working with Harry in the last year than the Order. She'd help save Tonks' life in August and had done what she could this morning to help Dobby. Each time Harry had paid her for her services. Why would he accept a lecture from me? He could hire

any Healer in Britain. She decided that she should rethink the lecture idea.

The meeting broke up at ten. Charlie visited with Hagrid for a while afterwards. Molly and Arthur visited with Fred and George. They left shortly afterward.

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Harry, Ginny and KJ were visiting in the family room at the burrow. They were showing her the bloodstuffs that they had made. KJ was describing the hundreds of new uses that had been found for various parts of deceased dragons. Molly and Arthur went to bed at eleven, and Charlie came home a half hour later.

Unlike the previous year, Ginny and Harry had no burning desire to hear the content of the meeting. Harry thought, Why hear about it? We lived it.

At 12:30, Charlie and KJ went to bed, leaving Ginny and Harry by themselves. Sitting on the sofa together, Ginny asked Harry, "So how was your day, Mr. Potter?"

"In truth, I ache all over. My side hurts, my face hurts and my arms hurt. I love your mum and dad, but I think they of anyone would want to see action rather than endless discussion. They had been targeted once before. Oh well. I'm so tired. Can we just lay down here?"

"I don't think mum would mind. I'll get the lights. Save me a spot Mr. Potter." She came back and there was only the light of the flickering fireplace. Harry had placed their staffs on the coffee table. Ginny scooted in front of Harry. In less than a minute they were asleep.

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Narcissa apparated about a quarter mile from the targeted house. The other Death Eaters appeared by her side moments later. She reviewed their plan. Two of them would quietly cast an anti apparation ward around the house while the others would seal the front windows and doors, then close off the windows in the back.

Their counterpart at the Ministry would quietly shut the floo service off from their house.

At 2:15, she would blast the back door open and the dementors would do the rest. As soon as the door had been opened, Narcissa and the other Death Eaters were to leave the area. The dementors had been told to suck out the souls of everyone in the house.

They began the short walk to the target.

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No one in the house noticed the momentary crackle like static electricity as the house became warded against apparition. No one noticed the Colloportus charms being quietly cast on the doors and windows. However one of the occupants did notice the fireplace flicker oddly. He'd spent hours staring into wizarding fireplaces and knew what was ordinary or unusual. He also felt an odd chill to the air.

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"Gin, wake up."

"Huh?"

"Wake up."

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. Grab your staff. Don't turn on any lights. Wake up your parents, Charlie and KJ."

Harry put his vest back on and had finished tying his shoes when the back door blasted open.

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"Leave now", said Narcissa to the other Death Eaters. "Let the dementors do the rest." As they were leaving, thirty of the dark creatures floated into the single opening into the house. Harry was in

the kitchen as the dementors floated by into the house. He put up his occlumency shields and ran to the blasted opening of the house. Seeing no one outside, he cast his first Patronus, then another. They were both regular size. Unfortunately since Harry was standing by the only opening in or out of the house, the dementors were trapped.

Ginny had just reached her parents bedroom when the back door had been blasted open. Molly and Arthur were quick to get up and grab their wands. Ten seconds later, Ginny cast her first Patronus. Her fox form ran around the room for a moment, then tore out the door. She could hear Harry cry "On three. One two three." Together they cast another. This time her fox was much larger. It raced through the house. Harry called again, "On three. One two three." She cast again. Another wolf sized fox ripped out the house.

Harry called again and they cast their giant Patronus forms. Moments later, they cast a fourth form. The squeal of the dying dementors and the hideous stench that was left was unbearable. For a moment everything was quiet. Then Ginny heard KJ scream, "Charlie."

-

Harry looked out the door for a moment and saw no one. He cast his Lumos spell and the head light sized beam flooded the back yard with light. No one was there. The only thing that he saw was the Mark hovering in the sky above the house.

Harry used the portkey that had been made from the money from the Ron Weasley fund. He found himself next to several shocked Aurors and a Mediwizard who had been stationed at the drop off zone. Quickly he told them that there had been an attack at the Weasley residence. "What's the address son," said the old wizard who obviously didn't see very well.

"Blimey, it's Harry Potter," said the other.

"Right. There's been an attack at Arthur Wesley's home, the burrow. Please notify Director Bones immediately." With that, Harry vanished. He had thought of the Weasley back yard, near the spot where

Narcissa had vanished. It wasn't warded. Five minutes later, the Aurors and Mediwitches began to arrive.

KJ was sobbing holding the more or less lifeless form of Charlie in her arms. Amelia came in, saw Harry there and called to the other investigators, "Everyone from the ministry investigative team out of the house, now."

A minute later, she asked the lead, a witch that Harry did not know to repair the back door and for the others to stand down until she returned. Safely inside the house, she asked, "Harry, what happened?"

Harry began, "I was sitting in front of the fireplace, and noticed it flicker oddly."

"Wait, Harry." She went to the hearth, picked up a large pinch of floo powder and threw it into the fireplace. Nothing happened. She called to one of her Aurors and said something to her. A moment later, the senior Auror as well as the others had all left. "Go on Harry," she said.

Harry described that he had just picked up his staff and gone to the kitchen when the back door blew open. Within a minute, Ginny and his Patronus forms had destroyed the dementors. Harry described quickly searching the back yard and using the emergency portkey to notify the Ministry before returning.

Molly and Arthur heard Harry talking and went to see who was there. A moment later, Tonks, Kingsley and Dumbledore had arrived. Amelia said that she needed to leave to check on something urgent and asked Kingsley and Dumbledore to go with her. She told Arthur not to touch anything and to spend the evening elsewhere. Harry told them they should go to his home.

After Molly, Ginny, and Arthur left, Tonks asked, "Harry, what happened?"

Harry described what had happened, distinguishing what he thought from what he knew. Tonks left a minute later with Charlie and KJ, asking Harry to stay put.

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The lone person watching the floo network was just restoring service to the Burrow when four Aurors burst in the office. Before she could react, she had been stunned three times and was lying on the stone floor.

Senior Auror Nancy Whiteheart told the others to search the attendant and take her to one of the holding cells. A few moments later, Bones, Kingsley and Dumbledore arrived. They saw the fireplace address of the burrow on a slip of paper. Bones and Dumbledore went to interrogate the attendant and Kingsley went back to the burrow.

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Harry collected thirty dementor robes and put them in a pile. He undid the locking charms and opened the windows to remove the stench. Harry charmed the air to give it a gentle breeze. Ten minutes later the air in the house was clean.

Harry closed the windows and placed all of the cloaks in a burlap sack that he'd conjured.

Kingsley returned and together they took one last look around the home, locked the doors and went back to Harry's home. It was 4 AM.

Winky greeted him. She would not touch the burlap sack and asked that Harry take it outside. He locked the bag in the garage.

Kingsley asked Harry about the cloaks. He told him that there were thirty. Tonks and KJ came back. Charlie was admitted into the long-term care wing at St Mungo's. Harry found a room for KJ to stay in. He went back down stairs. Kingsley and Tonks were waiting for him.

Kingsley said, "Arthur, Molly, Ginny and KJ owe their lives to you. I know the timing is horrible, but I just had to say thanks. You were not the target tonight Harry, Arthur Weasley was. He is in line to move up

to the number two job in the ministry on a permanent basis. He lost a son tonight, but it was one tragedy, rather than six.”

The big Auror could see that Harry was exhausted. “Harry, it has been a very long day for you. Please go up and get some rest. No one will bother you before ten. Thanks again.”

Harry went up to his room and showered. He scrubbed hard to get the real or imaginary stench off of him. He found Ginny curled up on his sofa, and scooted in behind her. She was so beautiful. His life was so horrible right now. How could he possibly deserve such beauty?

Sleep and peace found him.

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## Chapter 13

Harry woke up to a blinding pain in his scar. Somehow Voldemort found that the dementors hadn't returned and that only one person in the house had been kissed. Who cared about a zookeeper? Arthur Weasley had proven that he could get legislation passed within the Ministry with his muggle protection act. Voldemort needed a win if he was ever going to gain any support within the mainstream wizarding community.

He calmed down as he planned his next move. By the end of the morning, his anger had dissipated and Tom Riddle had a maniacal gleam in his eye.

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Ginny felt him convulse in pain and rolled over to comfort Harry. She kissed his forehead and held him tightly. After a minute he relaxed, and she could feel much of the stress leave his body.

Harry said, "He must have found out about last night."

Ginny didn't know what to say. She and her parents, KJ, and the man that she loved had been survived, and they'd managed to destroy thirty of those monsters, but she felt so very bad about Charlie.

Harry knew that the best thing to say to Ginny might be nothing, but he had an idea regarding the dementors that he wanted to talk over with Dumbledore. He held her and stroked her hair and kissed eyes. He grew hungry for her, but knew that this was not the time. Harry felt his healing energy flow into his heartbroken girlfriend. A half hour later, she kissed him back, and said, "Thanks for being there for me Harry. I'll never forget Charlie, but thanks to you, I still have mum and dad."

"Let's get up and face the day. You shower, and I'll find you some thing to wear."

"Don't forget the little things," she said playfully



“I couldn’t possibly forget about them. I’m just jealous of them. They spend all day by you. I’ll lay them outside the door.”

Fifteen minutes later, Harry walked down into the kitchen. He glanced at the headlines of the Daily Prophet.

Harry Potter Kicks Death Eater’s Arse! Walden McNair killed in a legal duel.

Death Eaters Attack Ministry Employee’s family. Visiting son is kissed by rogue dementors.

Neither story carried the details of the other Death Eaters capture or the destruction of the dementors. Harry wasn’t mentioned in the story from the burrow.

The crux of the Death Eater story was that nice guy Charlie Weasley – A former Quidditch captain, and dragon handler who never hurt anyone was intentionally kissed by the dementors. The individuals behind the attack had made the wizarding world a lesser place.

KJ had been quoted as asking, Who would feel proud supporting a cause that ruined the life of an innocent pure blood game keeper who had no enemies and had never hurt anyone?

Harry felt bad about leaving the Weasleys that afternoon. The joy that they had expressed about their new house had all been erased. Molly would probably never feel completely safe in her own home again.

Harry recalled the anxiety of Mrs. Granger asking about McNair. Only his death seemed to have brought any closure for her.

Somehow he didn’t think the destruction of thirty nameless dementors would provide the same level of closure for them as the capture (dead or alive) of the Death Eater who had led the attack.

Harry had his suspicions, but he had no hard proof that Narcissa was behind the attack. He considered her to be the most likely suspect because Riddle seemed to have lost most of his competent

supporters, and the newest recruits did not seem to possess much of a skill set.

Harry wrote Dumbledore and Flitwick letters. He tied them to Hedwig's leg after holding her for a few minutes and stroking her feathers. He opened the back door and set the beautiful bird off on her journey.

Harry and Ginny went outside for a quick walk in the park. They both hated that they hadn't been able to spend much time together over the holiday. They held hands but didn't have a lot to say. It was just good to be together.

Harry asked, "Gin, this last week has been the best and about the worst that I can remember. Can we go on a proper date one day next week? Tuesday is New Years Eve. If your Mum and Dad would let you, let's go to Paris. We could bring one of the watchers along if they insisted. I could ask Dumbledore to make us a portkey. I spent a bit of time there a few weeks ago, and it was fantastic. What do you say?"

Ginny was delighted. She was OK with spending so much time together with the other witches, but she was Harry's special witch. "Did you mean for the day, or longer?"

The hunger returned to Harry at those words. "I'd ask to stay for a month, but would settle for an hour. I'll leave that up to you. Remus will help you get a passport if you don't already have one. Please don't say anything to the other witches. I don't want to cause hard feelings, but I really want to spend some time alone with you. If your mum says no, don't press. We could sit together in the back garden at the burrow, and I'd be happy."

Go to Paris, for a dream date. If her mum said boo, Ginny'd hex her into the next century. "Thanks, Harry. I'd really like that too. I'll talk it over with mum, and leave you a note if we're gone before you get back. What time are you invited to the Bones?"

"One. Do you suppose I could borrow your owl for a bit?"

“Sure. Do we need to go back now?”

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. This was the best hour of my day. Thanks for spending it with me.” She reached up and kissed him. For a single minute they weren’t fighting a war. For a single minute, she hadn’t just lost her second brother. For a single minute, there were no thoughts of weapons. For a single minute she allowed herself to see a future as the mother of his many beautiful children. It was bliss.

“Wow,” was all he could say.

“Thank you Mr. Potter. Let’s get going. You have a letter to write and people to see. I’ll have a conversation with mum after you leave.”

Harry wrote a quick note to Hermione, asking that she devote her considerable talent to a specific worthy effort. Ginny’s beautiful owl would reach the Granger’s window in less than an hour.

Harry had a few quick words with Remus, and went to his room to pack.

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Professor Flitwick hurried to the headmaster’s office. He saw an identical note on Dumbledore’s desk. Flitwick asked, “Did he bring up the idea to you too?”

The old wizard nodded. “It is a brilliant idea really, though I have no idea if it is even possible.”

Flitwick replied, “We should contact Miss Granger. If she has a few days to spare, she might be able to find something given the change in circumstances.”

Dumbledore looked out of the circular window from his beautiful office. “There is no need. It appears that he contacted her as well. Please show her in.”

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Amelia Bone's home in Berkshire was a charming English country home. It was built in 1674. Even the address was charming – Old Basingstoke Road, Swallowfield, Berkshire. It was nowhere near the size of his own home, nor did it have any of the quirks of the original burrow. It did have a lot of charm. Unlike the sterile row houses that he'd grown up with at Privet drive, Amelia's home had charm. With five gables from additions built onto it over the years and wonderful massive dark oak woodwork, the home was built to last. The back garden was private and offered a place to relax at the end of the day.

It was too a large home for one, and Amelia was glad that Susan had come home for the holidays. She was delighted that Harry had accepted her invitation to come and visit. Spending time with him had been good for Susan. In all honesty, Amelia could hardly recognize her Grand Niece when she came home for the Christmas holiday. In place of the kind and gentle (though overly shy and slightly overweight) young witch that she'd sent to stay at Grimmauld place in July, was a young witch, brimming with confidence. Fit, firm, and obviously well tended, she commanded anyone's respect. Where there once was a young woman destined to be an administrator's wife stood instead, a competent witch, comfortable with her beauty, and with the confidence and poise of any third year Auror.

Amelia could only attribute the change to one factor – Harry Potter. Talking Dumbledore into including Susan in the training program that was being planned for Harry was the single best thing that had ever happened to Susan.

Susan greeted Harry at the door. She was wearing a pastel blue sweater that hugged her very well, a pair of jeans, and her diamond studs. "Hi Harry", she smiled at him. "Did you find the house OK?"

"Yes, but only because I'd had a portkey. I didn't travel much growing up, so it's hard for me to get to someplace for the first time."

"Come in. I'll show you around." From the entrance going straight was a hallway. On the left was the eating area and the kitchen. Going straight was the back door. To the right was the family room lined

with books and pictures of the two together in London, or on a holiday. Harry noticed that at least as many were muggle as not. As much as possible it looked like Amelia had provided a warm, caring and balanced life for Susan.

The three bedrooms were upstairs. An alcove by a window had been made into a sewing room. Harry put his things into the extra room, and they went down to the family room. Susan told Harry, "Auntie's over at the neighbors for a bit. They garden together and are always discussing what they will be planting in the spring – Flowers, vegetables, herbs, and such. How is Ginny?"

"She's OK. I didn't get to see her parents much. It was a really crappy thing to happen. The good news was, there was no place for the dementors to run. The bad news was there was no place for Charlie to run either. KJ was in a bedroom, he was out in a hallway trying to see what was wrong I suppose. We had them cleared out within a minute or two, but it was too late."

There was nothing that Susan could say.

"Anyway when it was all over, I picked up thirty cloaks. Charlie was taken to St. Mungo's, and the others went back home with me. I got back to sleep about four and that was my day. How about you?"

Having fought dementors with Harry before, she knew the terror that he'd faced, and shuddered. "Nothing like that. Auntie and I had stayed in and were watching videos. She got a call at about two, you know about that, and she was home when I got up this morning."

Harry nodded. His attention had shifted to the drawings that were on the walls. He hadn't noticed them before. There were several of Quidditch games, different areas of the castle, and different people that he knew. Harry noticed that he had been the subject of more than one of them. They were all pencil sketches, and it was obvious that Susan had a good eye for detail, and the patience to draw in the little details that made the difference. Harry commented, "I really like your drawings. You put in an amazing amount of detail."

"Thanks," said Susan. "Sometime I start from a picture and work from there. I like to sketch, but they're not very good."

Harry shook his head. "I like them a lot and I'm certain that other folks would too. Maybe you'll end up a famous and famously wealthy artist. The muggle world seems to like fantasy art. Charlie's friend KJ might have a need for some drawings for one of her books."

"Maybe, but then I wouldn't have a hobby."

"I suppose. You'd would be doing something that you like though. Oh, hi Ma'am."

"Hello Harry. Amelia, Remember? I'm glad that you could make it. Rough night?"

"The worst."

"Thanks for the tip about the fire. We arrested Michelle Edgecombe this morning. She confessed to stopping the floo service at the original burrow too."

"Things went bad for Marietta about a year ago, and sort of went down hill from there."

"Maybe, but apparently Michelle has been providing information and helping their side for years. She started with Malfoy nearly five years ago. By shutting off the floo service, most parents that had been attacked ended up staying in their homes to try and protect their children, and got killed."

Her words made sense to Harry.

As long as he had her in an a setting where they wouldn't be interrupted, Harry asked her about the war. It appeared that Riddle's group had suffered serious blows over the summer and were having a difficult time recovering. The confiscation of the Malfoy assets and loss of so many of the Death Eaters that had been in prominent positions within the Ministry had removed much of the influential power base that the dark side had enjoyed. If Arthur were

successfully moved into the number two spot, the light side's lock within the ministry would be nearly complete.

Harry asked her what if anything he could do to help. Amelia replied, "Harry, you could help our cause best by staying alive, continue to be visibly fighting the dark side, and continue to be visible in your support of Weasley."

Harry put down the coke that Susan had given him. Amelia continued. "Harry, Susan told me that each of you were asked to provide input for the next term apprentice program. What are your thoughts?"

Harry said, "I'd personally like to take classes on strategy, charms, transfiguration, combat, first aid, and business management. I'd also like to keep working with Tonks on a project."

Amelia thought about what he'd said and replied, "That's not a very balanced agenda, Harry." Unless you're looking for a career as a master hit wizard. I'd hire you in a blink.

"Probably not, but I could hire a potions or an Arithmancy tutor when I'm twenty if I still wanted to learn the topic. I believe that things will come to a head with Riddle in the next 6-9 months. The outcome there will determine what doors are open or closed."

Harry looked at Susan, who had been listening carefully and asked, "What are your thoughts?"

"I would like to continue with Herbology, Potions, Healing, and take a photography class if I could. I'm interested in drawing and photography."

Amelia asked, "Is that a very practical extra topic?"

"I noticed the different shading in the snow yesterday when I spotted the footprints. That's how I saw them."

Harry added, "Fred and George turned their interest into a pretty successful business."

"You both should keep thinking about it. How about an afternoon at the mall, dinner and a bowling match?"

"That sounds great to me. Susan?"

"Perfect. Let's go."

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Molly Weasley had not stopped crying since Harry had left. Arthur, Bill, Fred and George could simply not find the words to ease her suffering.

Ginny and KJ were at St. Mungo's. Harry had written her a hundred thousand Galleon draft to fund any and all expenses that might be incurred. Some wizards lived years after being kissed by a dementor, others lived only a few months.

Bill mentioned, "It sounded like the Order was doing everything that it could to help put an end to the war. When we were here at Christmas, I talked with Dumbledore. He seemed satisfied."

Arthur said, "The Order and the Ministry have done almost nothing in the last year except block the path of the one man who is likely to actually get something accomplished. I saw his memory of the duel yesterday. Harry was bloody fantastic. It was supposed to be impossible to destroy a dementor, but somehow he did it. Who from the Ministry has done anything proactive?"

Molly wailed, "I dreamed about this a year ago, in the library. I'm losing my family." Her boggart vision had been the loss of her entire family.

Fred and George said, "We'll win this thing mum. Whatever he needs, we will help him. He's helped us plenty in the past. If we need to train up a bit, than we should be able to at least help. He taught us more in his defense group last year, than I ever learned in the Order."

"Thank you dears. I know we'll get through it. Our parents got through the war fifty years ago, we'll manage too."



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Dumbledore's mustache quivered a bit as he chided his apprentice. "Harry, I'm surprised. You're a natural on a broom, a master on a battlefield, and a fourteen pound bowling ball seemingly has you flummoxed. I'm nearly 140 years older than you. If I can roll one down the alley, you can too."

Susan said, "Come on Harry. We will win this game for sure." Harry's score from the first game more closely resembled a champion golfer than a bowler.

"OK, but I'm switching bowling balls. I think that one really was jinxed."

Dumbledore said, "Thank you for inviting me Amelia. I haven't had the opportunity to do this in years."

"The lapse doesn't seem to have affected your game, Professor," said Susan.

"The old wizard nodded in agreement. Perhaps it's like riding a broom, once you learn, you'll never forget."

Susan looked at the other bowlers in the bowling center. "Professor, everyone here seems to be attempting wandless magic. Look."

"It's called body english my dear, and is considered to be an integral part of the game, as is I believe, the consumption of at least moderate quantities of beer. Allow me to refill your glass."

Susan giggled a bit at the thought. "Thank you Professor. Auntie, it's your turn."

Dumbledore commented, "All ten at once. An excellent roll Amelia."

"Thank you. Harry, your turn."

Harry aimed dead on the first pin in accordance with his somewhat incomplete instructions regarding strategy and technique. Amelia kidded him, "That was quite impressive, Mr. Potter. Very few bowlers can create three 7-10 splits in a row."

Susan who was a much better bowler said, "Come on Harry, You can get it."

Harry took careful aim and rolled the ball down the lane with an extra twist in the ball to give it a bit of spin. As the ball was about to land in the left gutter, it nicked the left side of the pin, which flew to the right and glanced the rightmost pin causing it to wobble for a moment and finally to fall over.

"A memorable moment. Excellent Harry."

"Thank you Amelia."

"You have one more turn Harry."

Harry aimed carefully and released the ball. Nine pins went down. Dumbledore nodded at the outcome. "Just enough Harry. Congratulations you two. I must be going now. Thank you all for a wonderful evening."

"Good night, Albus."

"Good night, Amelia."

Harry had only wished that his visit with the Weasleys had been as relaxed.

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## Chapter 14

Harry returned home the next day after spending a pleasant morning with Susan and Amelia. He learned more about wizarding politics spending a day with her than he had acquired in all of the first summer living with the Order.

Harry had given Susan a vault key before he left, again claiming that his Godfather had left him some money to pass out to his friends who were helping the cause of the light side. In reality that money was long gone, but Harry wanted to provide some parity for her with the witches that she was living with. It would provide her enough money to pursue a career in art if she elected to. As he had been with Katie, Harry was vague about the details of the account. She thanked him and didn't press as to the details.

The Weasleys were still there when he returned home at noon. He sat down and joined them for lunch. They seemed to have adopted a grim determination to fight on. Harry invited them to stay with him for the remainder of the holidays. They didn't have to be back at the castle for another week.

Ginny had asked her mum if she could go to Paris for New Years Eve. They had compromised by saying that they would all go. Harry said that he would have the reservations made. He would ask Remus to make reservations for six rooms at one of the small hotels that Harry owned an interest in.

Eventually it was decided that Molly and Arthur, Harry and Ginny, Fred, George, Angelina and Alicia, and Remus and Tonks would go. Harry made two sets of reservations at a little cafe that he had seen with Remus when they had been out shopping, Harry's New York Bar. It was in a crowded section of the city and they would feel safe there. He also made reservations at the Hard Rock that was in the next building.

At ten AM on the 31st they apparated to the wizarding entry point of the city. They crowded into three cabs and were seemingly given a tour of all of France to get to two miles distance from the apparation

point to the hotel. It was enjoyable and enjoyable ride, but Harry was glad that he'd brought a lot of French currency with him.

The weather was unseasonably mild and they had a great day walking around. Molly and Arthur needed some time alone together and the others were more than willing to comply. They agreed to meet back at the hotel at six. Harry added a bit of gray to his hair and aged his looks a few years. Ginny kidded him, "People will think that I'm your trophy wife."

Harry replied, "Then I must have won first place. I feel so lucky every minute that I get to spend with you. Shall we explore Paris together, or shall I explore every inch of your delicious being?"

Ginny took his hand. "Hopefully we can do both. Maybe I'll draw you a treasure map. Lets walk around for a bit first." They walked eight or nine miles and enjoyed the undeniably beautiful sights. Harry had meant what he'd told her earlier. He would have been just as happy sitting in the back garden at the burrow watching the brook with her.

Harry was glad that he'd had the idea to go to Paris for the night. To be honest, he was happy that all of them had gone together. The thoughts that Ginny might have had feeling bad about her parents staying home on New Years Eve had been eliminated.

Katie said that she was going to visit one of her girlfriends that had graduated the previous year, so she hadn't been left alone. KJ had gone back to the dragon colony.

As they were walking along Harry sensed that something was wrong. Ginny had been fretting about this long enough, and had to ask, "Did you have a good time at the Grangers?"

Shite, thought Harry...I'm walking down the streets of Paris with my girl on New Years Eve and we're going to get into a row over nothing.

"It was fine. We mostly played cards with Hermione's mum and dad then came up with an explanation for being gone all night when we got back. Her mum took the news pretty calmly after the initial shock." Harry thought, That went OK. What's next?

Ginny didn't say anything. He hadn't sounded like he'd had too good of a time. She didn't know why, but suddenly she was feeling very possessive of him right now. After what she thought was a reasonable time, she asked, "Did you have fun at the Bones?"

Harry'd had a few minutes to prepare this answer. "Actually I did. I talked with Director Bones at length on the state of the war, and classes for next term. After dinner, we went bowling with Dumbledore. She was pretty candid in her views of how I could best help the cause in general and your dad specifically."

If Ginny had subconsciously been looking for a reason to pick a fight, Harry hadn't provided her with one. She had become somewhat sensitive to the tittering within the castle about Harry's harem. At the same time, she had seen the multiplication power of a spell cast by a witch who had feelings for Harry. She knew that the six of them would have to continue together if they were ever to defeat Voldemort and begin their own lives. Her parents were alive specifically because of that multiplication effect.

The wave of frustration and jealousy that she had felt passed by as quickly as it had come on. "Let's go back to our room, Harry." They got to their room without any embarrassing meetings in the hallway with her parents.

Ginny saw the look of concern on Harry's face and asked, "What's wrong?"

"There's no sofa, just a table and a few chairs."

You should mention it to the owner. You gave away the biggest rooms to my parents, Remus, Tonks and the twins, she thought. "The room looks perfect to me," said Ginny. "Can you help me with this?"

Harry looked over and noticed that Ginny was asking him for help removing one of the little things that she was wearing.

"It would be my pleasure, dear lady."

Though we won't go into the details at this time, suffice it to say that Harry gave at least as much as he got from Miss Weasley. She learned that while he could be an extraordinarily violent man, Harry could also be kind, loving and had amazing manual dexterity. Ginny discovered that her breasts could be used to give as well as receive pleasure. Two hours later, they emerged from their room, showered, dressed, and relaxed.

They all met in the bar at six and had a glass of champagne together. Tonks and Remus had gone to the Louvre together. They told Ginny how it had once been the royal palace and a young wizard named Leonardo da Vinci resided there as the official painter for many years in the early 1500s

Fred and George had visited several wizarding joke shops with the idea of exporting some of their merchandise for resale.

They all had a fun time at Harry's New York Café, kidding Mr. Potter that it was neither his nor in New York. At 11 they made their way to the Eiffel tower, and apparated to the upper observation platform. Harry would have been content to take the lift, but Mrs. Weasley seemed to think that it looked dangerous and dreadfully slow.

They looked around for a while until midnight. They all wished each other a happy new year. Harry hoped that it wouldn't be their last.

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The rest of the week went by too quickly. On Sunday, Molly and Arthur returned to their home. They bid Katie goodbye, as she had to take the train then apparated back to the castle. They reviewed their second term objectives with Dumbledore, Flitwick and the other heads of house before the students arrived.

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Four hundred miles to the south, a different conversation was taking place. "The plan seems perfect, my lord."

“Let us hope so Narcissa. Perhaps a few smaller victories will have a greater impact than a single larger one.”

“Is Scotland the right place, my lord?”

“No. An attack in London will have a much greater impact, and perceived impact is at least as important right now as the actual damage to their side.”

“When will this happen?”

“The thirteenth. I have other business now. Make your arrangements.”

“Yes, my lord.”

-

About an hour before the students were to arrive, Dumbledore came and visited the apprentices again. Settling himself in with a cocoa, he said, “Good afternoon. I am pleased and relieved to see you all here. I read of your exploits over the holiday in the newspaper and inferred the details based on other conversations that I have had. I have gathered that the duel itself successful largely due to your efforts and prior planning regarding use of the excellent armor that Miss McVie created for you. I saw the original article with a rather large slice missing, and am only happy that it wasn’t you that ended up in the Ministry morgue.”

“Regardless of my personal concern for your safety and the overall priority, you in fact did the wizarding world a great service eliminating a mad dog that killed largely for pleasure.”

“Due to your insight and doubtless with the help of your good friends, you were able to capture the three intruders that had planned to spoil the event. Your planning and execution are to be commended.”

“I will ask that you address the student body before dinner and tell them properly with an appropriate level of detail. That will eliminate much of the hall talk and save you from having to retell the story four

hundred and fifty times. Without minimizing the efforts of your friends, I ask that you not identify anyone other than Alastor as having been there. I can not insist on this aspect, but believe that it will be for the best.”

Harry said, “I agree that there were participants that would prefer to remain unnamed, but I would not be here if my three friends here and others had not helped me. I will not name Order members or Ministry officials, but Susan downed a Death Eater. Ginny downed a Death Eater. Another witch downed a Death Eater; all due to the fantastic charm work that Hermione did to help locate them. Sir, there were five Death Eaters that day. We were able to stop four of them. It wouldn’t be right to ignore their work.”

“Perhaps you are correct. Use your best judgment. Were you able to identify the fifth Death Eater?”

“Yes sir. Narcissa Malfoy was there. It is my belief that she also led the raid on the burrow the next evening.”

The others were stunned. No one knew that Dobby had seen his attacker and told Harry about it. Dumbledore didn’t even know that there had been a fifth attacker.

Dumbledore said, “I agree with your assessment.” He looked at each of the others, but said nothing.

“Again, I am glad that you each are back and ready to settle in for another term. We each need to get ready for dinner. I will see you at the head table in fifteen minutes.” He left.

Ginny said, “Harry, when did you find out that Narcissa was there?”

Harry made an attempt at damage control. “He mentioned it the second or third time that I visited him. She was the one who tried to blow his arm off.”

“Why didn’t you tell us? Why didn’t you tell me?”



“Tell you what? There wasn’t much to tell. You saw her there. I nev...”

Harry knew that he’d said the wrong thing. Ginny walked up and slapped him in the face hard enough to knock him over.

Getting up Harry said, “I’m sorry Ginny, I didn’t mean to say or imply that anything.” She slammed the door shut and left for the feast.

Susan said, “That wasn’t fair of her Harry. We each did everything that we could that day. We need to go now.”

Gathering his things Harry said, “I don’t blame her. That was an incredibly insensitive thing to say, and I’m sorry that I said it.”

Hermione said, “No one meant to hurt Ginny’s feelings.”

The student all gathered at their long tables. The murmuring was different at the Slytherin table. Many of the older students knew or thought they knew Pucie, Betchly and Bole. Their names had come out a few days later. Katie looked at Ginny who was sitting on the same end of the hall, and saw the tears in her eyes.

Dumbledore stood and addressed the students. “Welcome back students. It is a delight to see that you have all safely returned. Many of you probably read that Professor Potter was involved in a legal duel on 27 December. It seems appropriate to let Professor Potter tell his story. After he has shared his story with you, I ask that you do not pester or bother him about it again. Professor Potter.”

Harry stood up to speak. Looking at the Ravenclaw table Harry said, “I challenged a man that I knew to be a Death Eater and believed responsible for the deaths of Ron Weasley, Luna Lovegood, and others to a legal duel. He accepted and I filled out the necessary paperwork and filed it with the department of magical law enforcement. The duel was properly refereed.

Harry took the miniaturized execution ax out of his pocket, and returned it to its full size of five feet. It was indeed a formidable looking weapon. “My opponent, Walden McNair was properly armed

with this ax and fought a fair fight. I believe that unbeknownst to him, several other Death Eaters tried to sneak into the area and ambush me if I were to win the duel. They arrived under the cover of invisibility cloaks with the intent to harm me. Fortunately the other apprentices and others that were there to make certain that it was a fair and legal duel spotted the Death Eaters and they were apprehended. For their help, I offer my sincere thanks and gratitude.”

Dumbledore stood and applauded Harry and the witches. Immediately every student and staff member did the same.

Dumbledore concluded, “Thank you all for making our world a safer place. That said, tuck in.” The food magically appeared, and to everyone’s delight, was pizza.

After dinner, Harry hurried back to his room and finished his prep work for his classes the next day. Ginny had realized that he hadn’t done anything wrong, and that his telling her as soon as he’d heard the news wouldn’t have changed anything. She quietly read in front of the fireplace. Katie was sketching a drawing of Ginny reading.

Desperately trying to help her friends, Hermione continued her reading in the restricted section of the library.

In Ravenclaw and Gryffindor towers, the students were toasting Harry Potter for avenging the murder of one of their own. Many of the older students secretly wished that they could switch Defense professors for the second term.

In his office, Dumbledore was beginning to believe that the power to defeat Riddle really was at hand.

## Chapter 15

Harry's first year class was doing especially good after the two-week break. Harry had expected that a number of the students would have forgotten the evasive maneuvers that he'd taught them. He practiced tossing two balls at a student at the same time. Little Gretta Wood was particularly nimble. Harry tried three times at about medium toss velocity. She deftly moved to the sides as needed and flattened out if necessary.

Harry was certain that they had mastered the basics. He decided on a brief oral exam. "Best defense?" he asked.

The class answered in unison, "No be there."

It seemed a simple lesson, but Harry was certain that his quickness and ability to move in and out of McNair's reach had been the reason for his success. Harry knew that the master ax man had the natural advantages of a longer reach and a heavier weapon. Harry knew that his own sword master who had been giving him advice would have suggested that Harry would have been outmatched with the weapon that he had chosen to fight McNair with.

Harry was reasonably certain that few if any of the Death Eaters did daily training, or any sort of structured training. He had heard that from Amelia Bones, and it was consistent with his own observation.

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Hermione thought about her friend Ginny. Like she had seen Harry do the summer before, she was certain that Ginny was working through some fruitless attempt to affix blame or responsibility for the attack on her parent's home. They may have had a chance to capture Narcissa a week ago, they may not have. Their objective at the time was to protect Harry and they had done that. The fact that any of them lived through that attack on the Weasley's home was something to be proud of. The fact that most of them got through it intact was due largely to luck that Harry was there and they were able to destroy the dementors.

She wondered why Voldemort had tried to kill the Weasleys. No one would have known that Harry or KJ had been there. Realistically no one cared about a zookeeper or a mum. That left Ginny or Mr. Weasley as the likely targets. She had heard that Mr. Weasley might be getting the Senior Undersecretary job on a permanent basis. Maybe it was an attempt to keep that from happening. Mr. Weasley's liberal positions within the wizarding world were well known.

The attack at her parents home had seemingly been a training mission based on the Death Eaters that had been killed. The same could probably be said for the first attack on the burrow. Narcissa may have simply been bringing those three to watch Harry get hurt or worse, but the last attack didn't need a lot of Death Eaters. All it needed was one capable person to blow a hole through their home to let them in, leaving the dementors free to do their horrible work.

Hermione shifted her thoughts to her own studies. She hadn't gotten as much work done over the holidays on her ancient runes studies as she had hoped, but she was midway through the seventh year material with it. She realized how fortunate that she was within the wizarding world to have been invited to participate in such a program. She had never even inquired with her parents if the tuition had been different. She would owl her dad this evening and ask.

The reality was that the heads of house and the other professors who were teaching these classes were doing it on their own time, as their contribution to the war effort. That Hermione or Susan or Ginny were receiving one of a kind educations was their own good fortune for having been associated with Harry Potter.

This term she would complete her NEWT Runes work as well as Arithmancy. She had hoped that the healing class would continue to provide her with the basics to continue on her own. She wanted to work at a faster pace in Transfiguration, but knew that their class of four had to stick together. Both Flitwick and Minerva had beamed at her when Harry had described in detail the snowfall that she had laid down to track the Death Eaters. She was so pleased that Harry had noticed that she had placed an additional freezing charm on the snow to make it cold enough to crunch when someone walked on it. She

had put a lot of extra work into it and hadn't told anyone, but she thought that it may have helped him.

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Susan was having similar thoughts. She had been more accepting of the Angels relationships than some, and realized that Harry needed help from Tonks, Katie, Hermione, Ginny as well as herself. Like Hermione, she was grateful for the opportunity, knowing that the education that she was receiving was worth much more than it was costing. In reality, Harry had volunteered to pick up all of the expenses for each of the instructors and like Dobby, had been negotiated down by deputy headmistress McGonagall to at least let the others pay their own room and board.

Susan had put her first term training to practical use a week ago, knowing that Winky could treat Dobby much more effectively than any human could have done. She had been surprised when Harry had handed her a vault key, delighted that he would even think of setting an account up with a few hundred extra galleons that she could have as her own. She had no way of knowing that it contained fifty thousand galleons, or that lacking other heirs, she (like the other witches) was currently named as partial recipient of the Potter fortune should Harry die before being married.

Susan did not understand the possessiveness that Ginny had been displaying since returning to the castle. She didn't own Harry. None of them did. She didn't know if it was Ginny's own insecurities, or her age, or both. Curiously she had probably dated the most of any of the apprentices. As such, Susan would have thought that Ginny would have been more secure of herself. She was so beautiful. Susan thought about it a bit more, and realized that they each were in their own ways. Certainly the physical conditioning had helped tone their bodies, but they all displayed a much higher degree of self-confidence than most teens.

Her thoughts turned to her potions and herbology work for the next term. She had collected dragon root in her last class. Hagrid had taken her into the forest and helped her find a spot to collect some.

She had enough left over to give some to Neville to work with for an extra credit project that he had been hoping to do.

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Katie could hardly contain herself. Listening to Parvati, Lavender and the other witches chatter on about their holiday, she realized that she would never be the same person again. She had captured a Death Eater, and trained with the apprentices! The adrenaline rush had been unlike anything she had ever experienced. Quidditch would never hold the same allure for her. The other students had no idea of the skill levels that their former housemates had reached since last June. She hoped that Harry would allow her to continue working with the group. She felt under her blouse and realized that by habit she was still wearing her vest, her Hungarian horntail armor vest. The same type that Harry Potter wore when he'd dueled with a dangerous Death Eater. It fit her like it was a part of her.

She had looked at the charts that they were keeping to record their personal progress with the exercise equipment. In the month that she had been working with them before the holiday, she had seen what she had thought was good progress. The two weeks that she had spent at Harry's home had more than doubled her progress. She had thought that she had been pretty fit before starting with his group. She'd had no idea that she'd have made as much progress as she had. Her skirts were all loose on her now.

She had helped Harry when Voldemort had hurt his head. Merlin, she could say the name without going blind! He-who-must-not-be-named. What a stupid phrase to call a killer. She'd said it. That's all he was, just a killer.

-

Ginny was less sure of herself than at anytime she could remember since her first year. Harry hadn't meant to hurt her feelings, but he had done so. He hadn't done anything behind her back, but he'd had his hands in Susan and Hermione. The fact that she herself had placed them there seemed to have slipped her mind. It had all been in fun at the time, and now she felt uncomfortable about it.

She realized that she was feeling sorry for herself at the moment. She was aware that the darkside / lightside killed or captured ratio was 70 to 18 for the year, but 2 of those 18 were from her family. It didn't seem fair. Her family had been paying a disproportional amount of the cost of the war lately.

It took her a few minutes of grieving to recall that another 2 of those 18 belonged to Katie. Susan and Harry had previously lost their parents too. Hermione had almost lost hers and would have, had it not been for Harry. As far as that went, he'd saved her and her parents last week. What had she been thinking of for snapping at him? Did she really have the emotional maturity to fight a war? Would he accept her back?

She decided to do something special for him to make it up to him.

-

Tonks had a great week at work. Director Bones had called the monthly Auror meeting. She had described the duel between Harry and McNair and the capture of the three Death Eaters by the apprentices. She sat by Hestia and Karen McKinney, the Auror that had watched her in St Mungo's. Hestia and Tonks both felt proud of their unnamed exploits. Tonks thought it more than just that she hadn't been mentioned this time when she had participated given that she had received undue credit and been promoted for the captures of Pettigrew and Malfoy over the summer.

She'd had a great time in Paris. Harry was so nice to have made the arrangements and had even paid for everything. She was looking forward to working with his morphing on Friday evening.

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Flitwick has shown them how to separate disappearance from reapparation – effectively making them invisible. It was very taxing and Harry could only maintain it for a few seconds at a time. Naturally Hermione had read several books on the theory and had plenty of

theory to back up her comments, but she was unable to physically do it at all.

“Keep practicing it from time to time. If you focus on it hard enough, you will improve at it,” encouraged Flitwick. Harry thought that it was a lot more taxing than double apparating.

Harry silently related what the little professor was saying with his own experience morphing. The progress had been slow even though Tonks had provided him with extra encouragement. Flitwick simply didn't possess that option. Perhaps when they got back to their common room they could all try together.

-

Dumbledore had asked to see Harry and Ginny after their defense class. He'd shown them how to use animated objects either defensively as he had done in the Department of Mysteries, or offensively. It was another mentally exhausting effort, and the apprentices were tired by the end of the lesson.

When Harry got to Dumbledore's office after the lesson, the old professor greeted him warmly, and handed him a butterbeer. As Harry was sipping his butterbeer, the ancient wizard began.

“Harry, I would like to reiterate my offer to have you join the Order as the leader. As such, I would offer to add a last subject to your very full schedule. I would offer to tutor you and the witches of your choice on wizarding politics.”

He continued, “Harry the war with Voldemort will not last forever. My sense is that he may be defeated by the end of the year. Neither of us believe that you are required to work for a living unless you succeed in giving away the entire Potter fortune. I am not suggesting that your contributions to the others' well being has been a bad idea. Given that you limit your endeavors to the remaining Black fortune, I believe that Sirius would have been extraordinarily proud of your decisions.



When Ginny arrived, he continued, "I need you and Alastor to be present on Monday the thirteenth for the trials of Betchley, Bole and Pucey in the morning. You and Miss Weasley will be needed for the trial of Michelle Edgecombe in the afternoon. I anticipate that Pucey, Betchley and Bole will each plead guilty of the lesser charges of possession of Death Eater paraphernalia, attempted murder and belonging to an illegal organization. Those crimes will result in shorter terms and prison and a significant fine." Harry nodded in agreement.

Dumbledore continued. "I anticipate Edgecombe will plead innocence and be found guilty of participating in several murders and attempted murders. I have asked Poppy to cover your classes for the morning."

Dumbledore handed Harry another Butterbeer. He resumed his monologue. "Harry the Order is really an ancient organization. It was founded shortly after the construction of the castle with the charter to be a watchdog against the ministry itself and against dark wizards. It was not designed exclusively to be a militia, rather to work with the ministry, but at an arms length. Fudge had been an adequate peacetime Minister. As Riddle resumed his efforts in your first year it became apparent that Fudge would be inadequate for the position in time of war. He refused to act to raise the defensive strength of the Ministry in preparation for a war that you and I could see in the making. I reactivated the Order at the end of your fourth year, and tried to recruit younger members such as Kingsley, Ms. Jones, and Miss Tonks. Unfortunately right-minded younger Aurors were in very short supply, and Fudge was sinking deeper into Lucius' influence. I was able to get Fudge removed from office and replaced by someone with competence and vision. Please join me on Sunday the twelfth at 7:00 PM."

Harry nodded. It couldn't hurt to attend a meeting. He could decide on further involvement with it after hearing what they had to say.

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Harry returned to the common room after visiting with Dumbledore. Katie was over visiting. Harry thought of Winky who appeared a moment later. He asked her to have dinner for them at six. He told them about the scheduled trials.

Hermione seemed a bit put out about something. "What's up?" asked Harry.

Hermione replied, "Susan, Tonks and Katie and I were responsible for capturing the Death Eaters. Why weren't we asked to be witnesses too?"

Katie replied, "Simple. We have the opportunity to avoid getting our names on Voldemort's top ten people to torture list. No thanks. I'll gladly stay off it if I can. Dumbledore, Harry, and Director Bones are already top targets. Do you really want to be a member of that little club?"

"No," she admitted, lowering her eyes. Katie looked over at Ginny who shook her head in agreement.

Changing the subject, Ginny said, "Show Katie what we learned today."

Harry replied, "I will. Give me a minute." He set his butterbeer down and concentrated on not being seen. There was a soft pop. Silently Harry took a few steps and tapped Katie on the shoulder, then took another step and tapped Susan and Hermione. He walked back to the chair and sat down. With only the tiniest pop, he reappeared.

"Harry," exclaimed Katie. "That was awesome! I could feel something touch my shoulder, but a moment later it was gone. Was that really you?" Hermione and Susan looked at him and nodded. They had felt him too.

Harry replied, "Yup. It's like you're there, but you're not. I felt that I could walk around, but I was sure that you would be able to feel me."

Katie replied, "Cool. Can you do it again?"

Harry smiled and said, "Yes, but I was thinking that Ginny or Susan or Hermione might want to have a go first." In truth, he was tired.

Susan tried. After a few seconds there was a soft pop. A moment later Harry felt something soft brush against his cheek. A few second later, Susan reappeared where she had been standing. She winked at Harry who smiled back.

Ginny tried next. She was having a hard time concentrating, and disappeared with a POP that sounded like a pistol shot. A moment later, she reappeared with another crack, a step away from where she had been. She felt light headed and sat down.

Hermione disappeared and put one arm on Ginny's shoulder, then patted her friend's head. A moment later, she reappeared. Ginny looked up at her and smiled.

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In his battlefield healing class Poppy demonstrated to Harry how to cauterize a massive wound. Once done, the patient would never be the same, but they might be alive. The goal would be to stop life threatening blood loss until healing with finesse could be performed.

It was by necessity a messy lesson. She and Harry were soaked with practice blood after fifteen seconds. After they had finished and took a minute to get cleaned up and dried off, she brought him back to her office and shut the door. "Harry, I had every intention of scolding you for your dangerous and reckless acts over the holidays, until I realized that they weren't reckless in the least. I also realized that no one else could have pulled it off. As such, I offer you my sincere apology for having misjudged your idea, and instead wish to express my gratitude for your courage and skill."

Harry knew that she was being sincere, but realized that she was an excellent barometer. "Poppy, it started out as a rash act. Fortunately, I had the time to think it through and the resources to engineer much of the risk out of the equation. In reality, by the time we met, it was a risk where I'd calculated the odds to be in my favor." Reflecting for a moment, he added, "I'm certain that McNair had done the same thing.

He continued. "In my business class, Ragnot told me that a person that buys a stock in a business is typically convinced that the value of

the stock would go up.” Poppy nodded. Harry continued, “He generally purchases the stock from a person who is equally convinced that the value will go down. The point is, they can’t both be right. I took a risk with McNair, and it worked out. More importantly, you stood beside me to come to my aid if we needed it. I can’t tell you how much that means to me. Thank you.” He looked her in the eye as he spoke, and she got a bit distracted. She may not have heard all of the words that he had said, but she felt his absolute sincerity.

Poppy momentarily had an unwholesome thought and wished that she were fifty years younger to act on it. “Thank you Mr. Potter. You’re a very good leader, and you obviously have passion for your cause. I will follow you anywhere, and wish you the best. Enjoy your evening.”

“Thank you, both for the lesson, and the butterbeer, but mostly for always being there for me.”

She smiled at him again. “My pleasure. Go now.”

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Tonks was annoyed with her friend Karen McKinney. She had missed her Sunday afternoon lunch two weeks in a row. Frequently they had been investigating different cases and didn’t see each other except socially, but she had never been stood up two weeks in a row before.

Her thoughts turned to Harry. He had made significant improvement in his morphing ability. It was nice to spend time with him this morning. For some reason she just felt better being with him.

She finished her drink and decided rather than be mad at Karen she would go over and visit her at her flat. She arrived at the door and knocked. No one answered. She had a key and let herself in. She was somewhat surprised that Karen wasn’t there as she was something of a homebody. Her plants looked dreadful, liked they hadn’t been watered in ages. Tonks left a note on McKinney’s table and left. She would probably see her tomorrow at Edgecombe’s trial.

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## Chapter 16

On Sunday evening, Dumbledore invited Harry into his own classroom. He had conjured a round table. At the table sat some thirty or so people, almost all of them were known to Harry. McGonagall, Poppy, Flitwick, Molly, Arthur, Remus, Hagrid, Moody, Tonks, Kingsley, Hestia, Diggory, Figg, Diggle, Fletcher, Malkin, Tom the bartender, the Honeydukes candy shop man, Aberforth, Fred, George, and a handful that he didn't know.

Harry quickly sized the group up with respect to their ability to fight and concluded that at best half of them could hold their own in a street fight. Harry would hold the apprentices or the DA up against them any day.

Dumbledore began. "Thank you for coming Harry. Professor Potter had been providing impressive leadership to the light side's next generation and I have asked him to come and see if we might be able to join forces in bringing an end to Voldemort and his band of followers." The few who didn't know him, thought it curious that Dumbledore would be joining forces with a mere student. Those who knew him had a different opinion.

Three years ago Hagrid had known Harry to face death to help set him free from Azkaban.

Remus, McGonagall, Flitwick and Pomfrey had seen his bravery and leadership in action countless times since he was eleven. They needed no convincing.

A year ago, Amos Diggory was convinced that Harry Potter was an unbalanced attention starved orphan that needed to be regulated. Then in one night, he proved himself in the Department of Mysteries, paving the way for his ticket as Minister of Magic.

Eight Months ago, Kingsley thought Harry to be something of a loose cannon. Then he captured Pettigrew and saved the Granger family. At present, he had nothing but respect for the man.

Seven months ago, Tonks looked at Harry's little adventures with amusement. Then he saved her life and proved himself to be the ultimate gentleman.

Six months ago, Molly would have insisted that Harry leave the room and let the adults handle the adult matters. Then he selflessly gave her family a place to stay.

Four months ago, Aberforth watched in awestruck fascination as Harry saved the village and destroyed some of the dementors.

Two months ago Madam Malkin watched Harry take in yet another war victim and made sure that she had a place to stay at over the holidays.

Last week Arthur had personally witnessed Harry face down thirty dementors saving him, his wife, daughter and a family friend.

Fred and George owed their livelihood to him. Having seen the DA group. They shared McGonagall's curiosity - Would he have us?

Dumbledore continued. "Not wishing to impose on Professor Potter's activities to chip away at the dark forces, I believe that our group can be of use to him, and his to ours. As such, does anyone have any objection to Harry becoming a member of the Order?"

Tonks stood and began applauding. A moment later all who knew him joined in. Within five seconds, everyone was applauding. "Very well then. Let us continue our business. Tomorrow, the trials of ..."

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The Wizengamot trial of the three young Death Eaters was the beginning of an unhappy day for Harry Potter. By tradition, the spectators were seated first. They were seated about an hour before the trial was set to begin. No wands or other weapons were admitted in the courtroom. As it turned out, both trials were scheduled in courtroom ten, the same room where Harry himself had stood trial eighteen months before.

The witnesses were admitted next. In this case, Alastor and Harry were the only two witnesses. It appeared that there were no defensive witnesses summoned. Harry walked in and noticed Tonks, Hestia, Minerva and Remus among the crowd. Harry also noticed Rita Skeeter and her photographer, Bozo. He nodded to her. Curiously he also noticed Oliver Wood in the crowded audience stand. Harry remembered that Oliver's older brother was one of the hit wizards killed at the Grangers last summer, and that his niece was one of Harry's first year students. Harry could understand how the conviction of Death Eaters might have become an interest of Oliver's.

The prosecution and defensive teams were admitted next. Harry recognized Amelia Bones along with a witch and wizard that he did not know. There was one person at the defensive table who Harry did not recognize.

The Wizengamot judges came next. In normal civil or criminal cases a sub-panel consisting of five of the fifty judges would handle the case, substantially lightening the workload on any of the individual justices who were all citizens first, and justices on an as needed basis. In the case of the highly publicized, or Death Eater trials, all fifty justices had been called. Harry darkly recalled that all fifty justices had been present at his own trial. Sensing his mood, Alastor said, "Most likely it will be over in ten minutes. These minnows know what they need to do." Harry nodded.

The Wizengamot clerk read the charges. "This trial on 13 January 1997 involves three Death Eaters. Auror, show them in. A massive Auror opened the side door and lead the three accused Death Eaters into the room. They were seated at the three magical chairs which chained them up. Deservedly, they looked terrified.

The clerk continued. "Anthony Betchley, Michael Bole and Adrian Pucey, you stand before the British Wizengamot accused of the following crimes;"

He looked at the sheaf of parchment and continued. "You are accused of possession of Death Eater paraphernalia. You are accused of possession of an unregistered wand. You are accused of

membership in an illegal organization. Finally you are accused in conspiracy to commit assault and murder on Harry James Potter.”

Flipping the parchments, the clerk continued. “The maximum sentences if convicted for each of the crime are one thousand, three thousand, ten thousand galleons and five years imprisonment respectively. Adrian Pucey, how do you plea?”

The young man faced the clerk and said, “Guilty.”

The clerk continued. “Michael Bole. How do you plea?”

There were tears streaming down Bole’s thin face. Looking up, he said, “Guilty.”

The clerk continued. “Anthony Betchley, how do you plea?”

Betchley looked hard, or as hard as one can look while chained to a chair. He said in a firm voice, “Guilty.”

Their council stood and said, “If I may make a brief comment, I would like to point out that Mr. Potter was not actually injured by any of these three young wizards.”

Amelia stood and replied, “If I may comment, the fact that Mr. Potter was not hit by a curse does not mean that one was not fired. Mr. Ames, are you disputing the deposed record from Mr. Potter stating that a curse was fired at him?”

Mr. Ames replied, “No. The defendants are not disputing that.”

The clerk stood again and asked, “Are there any other comments?”

Amelia shook her head, and said, “None from the Ministry.”

Mr. Ames said, “None from the accused.”

The clerk said, “Everyone please remain quiet and seated while the justices determine the sentences.



After ten minutes an older witch rose from the Wizengamot crowd. She began. "This case was largely about intent. The law prohibiting possession of Death Eater paraphernalia was designed to communicate that that foul organization is not to be glorified. The law remained on the books and is now strictly punitive. For possession of Death Eater Paraphernalia, you are each fined one thousand Galleons."

Hestia thought to herself given that she now made nearly six thousand Galleons a year, that was a lot of gold for a mask.

Harry finally recognized the old witch as Neville's Grandmother. She still looked ill. She continued. "The law prohibiting possession of an unregistered wand is intended to punish the usual reason for having an unregistered wand- Concealment of or evasion from being recognized for having committed a crime. For that you are each fined three thousand galleons."

She continued. "The law prohibiting membership in an illegal organization such as the Death Eaters is designed to discourage even passive membership in a terrorist organization regardless of one's individual role within that organization. For that, you are each fined ten thousand galleons."

Harry realized that it was unlikely that any of the three actually had fourteen thousand galleons.

Longbottom continued. "Your counsel's comment regarding intent had some merit. If you had actually succeeded in murdering anyone, you would be facing life terms or worse. As actual intent was not proven, you are each sentenced to three and a half years. Your fines are ordered to be paid prior to your being credited for serving time will begin." She collected her papers and the justices all left the courtroom.

As Harry was getting ready to leave, a stout wizard wearing a hood walked up and wordlessly handed Amelia a Gringotts draft paying each of the three wizards' fines. He walked out of the courtroom. Harry nudged Moody who nodded and said one word. "Fudge."

Moody had been right. The entrances and showmanship of the trial had lasted longer than the proceeding itself.

Harry left via one of the side exits and met up with Tonks. "Hi Sis. How are you?"

She smiled. "It's tall, dark and Harry. Good to see you lil Bro. Do you have to be anywhere until the Edgecombe trial, or can two lustful women take you to lunch?"

Harry smiled at Tonks and Hestia. He replied, "I have to sign a couple of documents this morning at Gringotts, but that won't take long. I would be honored to have lunch with you both."

They walked the length of the alley until they reached the marble building. They were greeted at the door and shown into one of the private conference rooms. Ragnot greeted Harry and as promised, they were done within five minutes.

They had lunch at a new pub, The Snowy Owl. Tonks was surprised to see Angelina and Alicia there. "Hi Harry," they said. "We were hoping that you would come and see us. Thanks so much for loaning us the money to get started."

"I couldn't resist the name," said Harry, "And it wasn't a loan. Consider it an engagement gift for the four of you. I'm just glad that you two were able to make your dream a reality."

"Thanks, Harry" said Alicia, smiling at him. "Have a seat. What can we get for you?"

Harry ordered a sandwich with crisps and a butterbeer. Tonks and Hestia each ordered salads and pumpkin juice. Alicia left them alone. Hestia started to ask about the pub, but Tonks cut her off, saying. "That's just Harry. He has this helping beautiful witches thing." She smiled and kissed him on the cheek as Alicia returned with their food.

They finished lunch. Harry insisted on paying the bill, thanked Alicia and Angelina and they made their way back to the now packed courtroom.

Harry and Ginny were sitting in the witness chairs. Michelle was brought in and the chair seemed to chain her a bit tighter than the three wizards had been earlier in the morning. The clerk read, "Michelle Edgecombe you are charged as a willing accessory in the following murders and attempted murders - Nine Aurors and three hit wizards on 12 July in Surrey County. You are also charged as a willing accessory in the murder of Ronald Weasley and Luna Lovegood on 11 August. You are also charged in the attempted murder and torture of Charlie Weasley, Molly Weasley, Arthur Weasley, Ginevra Weasley, Kelly-Jean Whitehope, and Harry Potter. How do you plea?"

Amazing everyone, Michelle said, "Guilty. They all deserved to die."

The crown erupted into a mass of white noise.

There was no need for deliberation. The laws regarding the murder of an Auror were very specific. Dumbledore rose and at once the room became deathly silent. "Ms. Edgecombe. You have paid for your hatred with a life sentence in prison, and forfeiture of all of your family assets. Thank you all for attending." There was cheering and a range of approving gestures from the crowd as Michelle was led away.

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Tonks was walking out of the courtroom with Harry and Ginny. The corridors were quite crowded. A dozen steps ahead of her, Dumbledore had stopped to talk to a well-wisher. They had made up half of the distance when it happened. As if in slow motion, Tonks saw a glassy eyed Karen McKinney draw her wand and say Reducto. Tonks screamed as the jet of red light hit. A moment later, there was blood everywhere.

-

A/N

Please review. I would be delighted to hear from you.

## Chapter 17

The two warriors acted instantly. Splattered with blood, Tonks took four steps and crashed into McKinney knocking her over. Harry ran up to Dumbledore and caught him before he could even fall to the floor. Then they both disappeared.

Tonks pulled her wand and stunned the Auror who she had counted as friend. Ginny's only reaction was to shout, "Harry!" where her boyfriend and the ancient wizard had been moments before.

Alerted by the noise, Hestia ran up and slipped on the bloody floor. Realizing that she had landed on someone, she turned around to say excuse me, until she realized that her head had been cushioned by landing on Dumbledore's severed arm. She got violently ill.

Amelia had heard the explosion and turned to see what had happened. All she saw was the little blonde Auror crash into someone. With a unique presence of mind she called, "Everyone get down." Given the times, people did not need to be told twice. She called, "Senior Auror Tonks, what happened?"

Tonks replied, "I need help and a set of maniacs." Kingsley got up and helped her manacle McKinney without asking. She nodded, and he used his emergency portkey to take her to the holding cell.

Ginny couldn't wait any longer. She cried out, "Where's Harry?"

Bones quickly cleared the corridor except for Jones, Tonks, and Ginny. "What happened?" she demanded.

Tonks said, "Harry and I were walking down the hall about a dozen steps behind Dumbledore. He stopped to say hello to someone and McKinney hit him with a Reducto charm. Harry and I saw it happen. He ran at Dumbledore and I put down McKinney."

Bones said, "Auror Jones, there are only two logical places that Harry would have tried to take Dumbledore – Hogwarts and St. Mungo's. Please try St. Mungo's first. If you find them, please report back to my office. Good work Tonks. Miss Weasley, please come with me."

-

Harry double apparated Dumbledore to the floor at St. Mungo's where Tonks had been. He shouted, "Healer Crabtree, Help!"

One second turned to two, turned into five. Dumbledore's lifeblood was spilling all over the floor. Harry acted. Using the same lesson that Healer Pomfrey had shown him days earlier, he sealed the wound on Dumbledore's spraying arm. It had been severed at the bicep, and was very messy.

A few seconds later, the first attendant came. Harry displaying a unique presence of mind said, "He'll need five or six units of blood restorative potion. Now. Move!"

Harry concentrated as hard as he ever had and tried to transfer some healing energy into Dumbledore. Healer Crabtree came by and summoned some potions. Within seconds she had poured the first one down Dumbledore's throat. Harry estimated that he'd lost as much blood as Tonks had. "He'll need five or six at least.

Crabtree checked the arm while waiting for the other attendants. "Did you do this?"

Misinterpreting her question Harry replied. "No he was attacked outside the courtroom."

"No. Did you heal his arm?"

Not focusing on her question, he replied, "I guess so."

Crabtree gave a rare smile. "Excellent work. Did Pomfrey show you that?"

"Yes ma'am."

Impressed at the finesse that he used in a battlefield setting, she asked, "How long did you spend on it?"

“About one second. Look, he was bleeding to death.”

“Here hold him steady. Let’s get another unit down him. You’re well versed in battlefield healing Mr. Potter. Well done. Hold him a little higher.” She poured the third unit down him.

By then Jones had caught up with them. Not wanting to bother anyone, and nearly sick from the sight of so much blood, she ran down the hall, and lost the last of her lunch.

Five minutes later, Crabtree had finished pouring the fifth unit of potion down Dumbledore. He had not gagged yet, indicating that he might accept a sixth unit. Given his age, Crabtree had serious reservations about using so much potion.

Harry was exhausted, but still he held his mentor. Poppy appeared and asked how she could help. Crabtree looked at Potter, and replied, “Your young healer has done all that he can, and needs some rest. Please take him back to the castle. Mr. Potter, please go back and get some rest. We may need you again this evening. Healer Pomfrey, he shouldn’t be bothered. He probably is exhausted.”

At that Kingsley stood guard outside Dumbledore’s door. Harry accepted the portkey back to Dumbledore’s office and Poppy led him to his reserved bed. Within five minutes, he was asleep, still wearing his bloody robes.

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Amos Diggory was admittedly in a panic. The one steadying force for his entire life had been Dumbledore. Now Diggory faced the likelihood that his days were numbered. He had already received (premature) reports that Dumbledore had died on the floor in St. Mungo's. Only a personal confirmation from Amelia that she had seen Dumbledore alive, alleviated those fears, however slightly.

If Diggory was in a panic is was nothing to what the British wizarding world was feeling. The Daily Prophet ran a special, and it was being distributed before Harry had even been put to bed. By dinner time

virtually every witch or wizard in Britain believed Dumbledore to be on death's door.

The reaction at the school was mixed. Many of the students and some of the staff felt that same as the general wizarding population. They believed that it was simply a matter of time before he-who-must-not-be-named walked into the school or the ministry, demanded surrender, and that would be that. If he took several virgins along the way as would be a dark lord's right, so be it.

Some of the students who had, at a minimum, taken on a neutral stance when Dumbledore had obviously been winning the war, shifted their stance back to their traditional view and were ready to openly support the dark lord.

There were those whose faith in Dumbledore was so deep seated felt that it would just be a matter of time before the old master would be back, and ready to go.

A few felt that the torch had in fact already been passed the night before. They had anticipated a longer, more graceful transition, but in their eyes, the real leader of the free wizarding world was currently resting before dinner.

A white owl was released from the Owlery as Harry was sleeping. It was carrying a short message.

Auntie,

Please send Tonks to Hogwarts. Harry needs her.

Susan

At 4:30 Harry woke up, still wearing Dumbledore's blood on his gray robes. He asked to see three people, Professors Flitwick, McGonagall, and Minister Diggory.

At 5:00 the four were seated at a small table in Harry's classroom. "My suggestions are as follows. For the next six weeks, we drop History of Magic, and teach first aid instead. That would necessitate a

change in the OWL examinations eliminating questions on content between 1400 and 1850. Professor McGonagall, I suggest that you be appointed interim headmistress of the school. You could appoint Hermione or one of the other sixth or seventh years as student teachers for the first two or three year classes. Professor Flitwick, I request that you take over leadership of the apprentice program, at least on an interim basis. Minister Diggory, please find three or four qualified people that can teach the Aurors and Ministry workers how to fight off the Imperius curse. I know that it can be done. Barty Crouch's son taught me how."

If Diggory had been daydreaming during the start of Harry's words, his attention snapped back at the end. In the last war, He-who, Voldemort had taken to using the light side's own people as his unwitting soldiers. Diggory would not allow that monster to ruin two sets of lives like that again. He nodded in agreement.

"What else?" asked Minerva.

"We hold class in the morning. School should be run business as usual to get everyone's mind back on their studies. I need to go back tomorrow afternoon to help the professor."

At 5:30 a weary Harry Potter, the apprentices and the heads of house made a point of coming down the stairs together. As one they sat, and as expected, every eye was upon them. As expected, the students took comfort that the school appeared to still be running. Several of the students who only hours before had been tempted to switch allegiance reconsidered their position.

At 7:00 Minerva called a staff meeting and announced that History of Magic was being cancelled until further notice, most likely for two months. In its place, the school would be gaining proficiency in first aid. Surprised at the news, Poppy was delighted when Harry told the group that one of his first years told him "Madam Pomfrey ran the class today, and she showed them some really cool stuff." She mouthed Thanks at him. He winked.

At 8:00 Susan Bones and Hermione Granger were called in Minerva's office and asked if they would assist in helping with the first and



second year classes in Charms and Transfiguration respectively. The apprentices would have their own schedules rearranged and continue with their own work.

At 9:00 Tonks and Katie Bell arrived. For the first time since Christmas, the six people who would end up fighting Voldemort were together again. Katie had been given a pass for the evening and was not expected back. Knowing that they would not be disturbed for the rest of the evening, they sat by the fireplace holding each other and let their magical energy wash over each other.

At that moment, both Voldemort and Dumbledore were resting comfortably, each convinced of their side's victory in the upcoming showdown.

Harry had enjoyed the best sleep that he could remember. Before leaving for breakfast Harry told the witches, "Thanks to each of you for sharing your magical energies with me last night. We will face Riddle this spring, and we will win. Senior Auror Tonks, if you have the day available, I would ask that you accompany me to my second year class after breakfast. I would like to demonstrate dodging spells, and I know that they would be amazed to see how quick you are at casting spells."

Harry continued, "Ginny if you would be willing, I would like you to lead the DA group this evening at 6:00. It will be out on the Quidditch pitch. Please tell everyone who can fly to bring their broom. We will have dinner late." Initially feeling a bit left out over the changes, Ginny beamed at him.

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At 7:30 that morning Minerva stood up. "Please remain seated. Your first two classes will begin thirty minutes late today with a shorter pizza lunch served. We have some announcements regarding schedules and events."

Harry stood up and addressed the students. "Excuse me. I wanted to let you know that Professor Dumbledore was attacked yesterday at the conclusion of a Death Eater trial that he was presiding over. I was

one of the people who saw the attack. Senior Auror Tonks captured the person who fired the spell at Professor Dumbledore. He was hit and he was badly hurt. I took him to St. Mungo's because the anti-apparation wards within the castle prevented me from taking him to see Madam Pomfrey. I gave him first aid by using some of the knowledge that she has so kindly taught me this last year. I will go to see him this afternoon, and I promise you that I will give you a report this evening when you have dinner. Professor."

Knowingly or not, Harry had just made Minerva's job much easier. "Thank you, Professor Potter. Thank you very much. We will be having some staffing and schedule changes for the next few months. First..."

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The students were amazed and generally delighted. They would get lessons from Hermione Granger, and Susan Bones. No more boring History of Magic. They would learn a dead-on useful class from a healer who had just received the best possible endorsement. In most of the students' eyes the only thing that could possibly have been better would be if they were first or second year students themselves.

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The second years were delighted when Tonks walked into Harry's class five minutes after it started. He had promised them a live demonstration of the usefulness of the skills that he had been teaching them for half of a year.

Tonks looked amazing in her crimson Auror robes. She projected a delightful mix of friendly approachability and awe inspiring confidence. Harry knew that her pageboy length sandy blond hair was her own, and smiled at her as he individually introduced each of the little students to her. Harry had them line up by one of the walls and he vanished all of the furniture in the classroom. The students stood on either side of Tonks standing slightly behind her, so they could get a good view. She said, "I am going to cast jelly legs jinxes at Professor Potter. How many of you think that I can hit him with it?"

To her surprise and slight disappointment, not one of the students raised their hand.

Unknown to Harry or Tonks, Moody, Minerva, and Flitwick were standing outside the door watching in.

Harry said, "OK, Auror Tonks. Five tries. Go."

Tonks aimed dead on at Harry. He was watching her closely. The student's eyes were fixed on their favorite Professor. A jet of red light shot at Harry. He dodged to the right and easily missed it. She fired again. Harry dodged to the right again. Tonks fired a third time this time aiming to the right of Harry. He didn't move. Tonks fired two quick spells forcing Harry to drop and roll to the left.

The class cheered for their favorite Professor.

"Who else wants to try?" asked Tonks. "Professor Potter's just too quick."

The class turned to Hanna. Harry nodded encouragingly.

She traded positions with Harry who offered to hold her wand. He whispered something in her ear. She beamed at him. "OK Senior Auror Tonks. Three tries. If you win, I have to buy you a dinner. If you lose, you have to buy butterbeer or Honeydukes chocolates for each of the students."

Outside, the professors were busy making their bets. Moody bet on the little girl. Minerva and Flitwick bet on the Auror's desire to have dinner with the emerald eyed hunk.

Harry acted as referee. "Hanna, are you ready?" She nodded at him. "Senior Auror Tonks, are you ready?" She nodded. "If, you're ready, then go."

Hanna watched Tonks' eyes as Professor Potter had taught her. Tonks cast dead on chest high. Hanna dodged to the left. She'd done it. She'd dodged a real spell cast by a real Auror!

Tonks was honestly surprised. "Good job. I'll try again." She aimed slightly to the left. Hanna had watched closely and dodged to the right.

Tonks aimed at the girl's hips. It always took longer to move your hips than your head or shoulders. She realized that she really would like to have Harry buy her dinner and spend some time with him.

Harry stepped in for a moment. "OK Senior Auror Tonks, hold up for a moment. We'll double the bet. Two dinners if we lose. Butterbeers and chocolates if we win. He went over to Hanna and whispered something in her ear. She nodded.

Outside, McGonagall and Flitwick were searching their pockets for galleons.

Hanna turned her body so she was perpendicular to the young woman. She now presented a smaller target. She could either lean forward or fall back.

Tonks aimed at her feet and fired. Hanna jumped and the spell missed her! The class ran up to congratulate her while Harry went up to Tonks and whispered something in her ear. She beamed at him.

Outside Moody was collecting his winnings, knowing that Potter would never have set the spunky little girl up to fail.

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News of Hanna's success spread throughout the school. More than a simple bet over a butterbeer, it demonstrated that Harry's lessons were effective against real opponents. The students calmed down a bit. The students who were in the DA felt a lot better about themselves.

Harry and Tonks left the school after lunch to see Dumbledore. They found healer Crabtree. She told them that she originally had not expected Dumbledore to last the night. He was in a coma, but he was alive. She led them into his room and closed the door behind her as she left. She was please that they were making a noble effort, but his wounds were simply too severe.

“Hold his hand Tonks”. Harry leaned over and pressed his forehead against the ancient wizard and felt his healing energy flow into the ancient wizard. She held Harry’s other hand. For fifteen minutes they stayed where they were. Harry was exhausted when Dumbledore’s breathing finally changed. With a giant cough, Dumbledore woke up.

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Happy Valentine’s Day. Please review.

## Chapter 18

Harry and Tonks were sleeping in the chair holding each other when Healer Crabtree walked in. She was pleased that Dumbledore was still alive. She was surprised that Dumbledore was awake. She was even more amazed that he was staring and smiling at the two young people.

Crabtree asked, "How do you feel Professor?"

With amazingly little effort for a 150 year old man who had been in a coma thirty minutes earlier, Dumbledore replied, "I am grateful to be alive and most likely feel as good as I ever will again. If you would be so kind, Healer Crabtree, please summon Director Bones for me. Also, if you could send an aid in, I would be happy to get dressed. Please let my young friends sleep for an hour and have someone make them a portkey to return them to the castle."

Sitting up in his bed, he said, "Thank you, Healer Crabtree. I am grateful to have received your excellent care."

She smiled at him. "You are welcome Professor. I'm delighted to see you in as good of a condition as you are, though I believe it is only temporary, as you may already know. In reality, almost all of the credit belongs to Professor Potter over there. He had already treated you by the time I saw you. You may have as long as a month, but the end-of-life's wheels have been set in motion."

Dumbledore nodded. "I understand. It is my responsibility to spend the time carefully. Please have someone find Amelia now."

-

An hour later, Harry and Tonks awoke, slightly embarrassed to have been so tangled up around each other. The door was closed and someone had covered them in a light blanket. Dumbledore's bed was empty.

Tonks immediately thought the worst, but Harry held her for a moment and smiled. "He's probably back at the castle by now."

Thanks for helping me, Tonks. I couldn't have helped him much by myself."

She smiled at him and kissed his cheek. "Harry, I don't know what you did. I don't know how you did it, but whatever you did, thank you, and however I helped, you're welcome."

He set her on her feet. Let's get going. There was a note on the bed from Healer Crabtree, along with a portkey for them to use to go back to Hogsmede station. They read the note and each touched the portkey. A moment later they were in northern Scotland walking to the castle.

-

Dumbledore amazed the students as well as the staff by appearing at dinner. Assisted by Tonks, he made his way to his seat. In reality, he didn't eat much, but in this instance, appearance was everything. He guessed that 450 letters would be going home this evening from the students to their parents. He was right. By 7:00 PM the Owlery was empty. Little Hanna Smith had found Harry and Tonks. Colin had taken a photo of the three of them together. The little witch was ecstatic. Harry let her borrow Hedwig to send a copy home to her mum.

Harry had asked Ginny to give the DA members some practice at casting spells while riding their brooms. It was much harder than it looked, and she started by having them cast sparks at balloons in strings tied to the ground. At the moment, they would be in nearly as much danger from falling off of their brooms as they would from getting hit by a spell. They would need to practice more, but it was a start.

At 7:30 Harry, Tonks, the apprentices and Katie received the call to go see professor Dumbledore in the hospital wing where Poppy had insisted that he spend the evening. The ancient Wizard looked smaller than Harry remembered seeing him. Dumbledore asked Harry to wait outside while he talked with the witches for a while.

Harry waited outside the private room on his own reserved bed. He made a point of not listening to what they might be saying. After twenty minutes, the door opened, and Susan waved him in. Harry could see that they each had tears in their eyes. He assumed that Dumbledore told them that his time was quite limited.

“Good evening, Professor.”

Dumbledore smiled at the young man he so proudly considered his friend. If the truth was to be told, it was Dumbledore who was in awe of Harry. “Good evening Professor. First I need to properly say thank you to the two of you for giving me a month to set my affairs in order. I am truly grateful for everything that you have done for me, but I formally request that you do not attempt to repeat your loving and selfless act. A month is truly long enough.”

Dumbledore placed his right hand on Harry’s shoulder. “I am sorry to say that I must curtail the afternoon visits that we’ve had each day. I did so enjoy them. I understand Harry that you had the foresight to ask Filius if he would consider leading the apprentice program. I think that an excellent idea and will formally ask him in the morning. I would like to contribute more to your effort, but I believe that many of the lessons would best be communicated via pensive. Harry, I know that you have one. Miss Bones, perhaps you could...”

“I’ll order one for everyone in the morning Professor. They will be here by noon.”

He smiled at the very capable young leader. “Very good, Harry. That will make things much easier. If you could, try and get the solicitor variety. They do not have the same capacity as the traditional model, but it is easier for more than one to view the memories. I will share many things with each of you, and simply ask that you use appropriate discretion when re-sharing them.”

Pausing for a moment, he said, “Harry, if this is your chosen team, I would ask that you share the prophecy with each of them this evening, if you have not already done so. Also, if your schedule permits, I would like to spend an hour or so with you before breakfast. Would 5:30 in my office be too early?”



Harry nodded in agreement. Dumbledore smiled and asked Harry to rest well and enjoy his evening.

-

That evening, as Harry was sharing the prophesy with the others, Dumbledore was making arrangements with Amelia Bones to have Tonks assigned to the school as long as Harry would have need of her. They talked candidly about the future and about the past. She knew that he was staking the future of the wizarding world in Britain on her niece and the five others.

She asked about Harry and his stated ability to throw off the Imperius curse. Dumbledore suggested that she have Moody try it on him tomorrow afternoon, and she could judge for herself.

Dumbledore knew that Crabtree's estimate of a month was simply an estimate. He didn't know how steep the decline in his health would be, but decided to plan as if he had two workable weeks remaining. He mentally decided to allocate half of the time to Harry, a day with Minerva, a day with Diggory, a day with Aberforth, a day with the rest of the staff, a day with the board of governors and the Wizengamot, a day at Gringotts and Diagon alley, and a day in the forest and Hogsmede. If he was given additional time, he could see what needed to be done.

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While Dumbledore was planning his week, Riddle was planning his. Believing that Dumbledore was already dead, or at least on death's very door, Riddle was planning a massive attack on Hogsmede. He would throw the remaining dementors at the town then have the Death Eaters sack and burn the village after they had left. He would need a few days to make the arrangements to ensure a victory.

-

Ginny was a torn bundle of emotions. On one hand, she wanted to hex Harry into oblivion for leaving her outside the courtroom. On

another, she wanted to rip his robes off and ravish him. On another, she couldn't believe that he double apparated a dying Dumbledore to St. Mungo's and somehow healed him. On another, Dumbledore pleaded with the five witches to put aside their individual differences and give Harry whatever assistance he needed in the coming months. She felt like Dumbledore had read her mind and looked into her very soul searching for her innermost feelings.

Harry knocked on her door and asked if they could talk for a bit. She invited him in. He asked about the DA meeting and she told him that they needed more work. Harry asked her to call another meeting for the weekend so they could practice.

She realized that she felt starved for his individual attention, but was certain that he had more on his mind than he could handle as it was. Hearing the prophecy for the second time seemed to have had more of an impact on her than it did the first time. The first time, it had terrified her. An hour ago, it filled her with hope.

Dumbledore had requested that they not discuss his health with anyone, stressing the importance that the illusion of his health would have strategic importance in the upcoming month.

Harry thanked her again for helping with the broomstick squad. She gave him a hug and he went back to the common room.

A few minutes later, Tonks came up to Harry, whispered something and left. Ten minutes later he met her in his classroom. She had conjured several mirrors. She asked him to seal the door and walk over to the mirrors. When he did, she said, "Close your eyes, Harry."

Half a minute later, Harry felt a poke on his back. Harry turned around, only to see a barely dressed Ginny Weasley! Tonks was nowhere to be seen.

She motioned for him to close his eyes. As she kissed his lips, and felt the warmth of her lithe body, Harry could breathe in the faint smell of strawberry.

“Good try Tonks,” he said as he opened his eyes, except he was facing an equally underdressed Susan. The little things that Tonks had been wearing looked like tiny things on Susan.

“Get dressed Tonks,” said Harry, somewhat annoyed.

“Harry, you missed the point,” said Tonks playfully. “You were too busy staring at Susan’s fabulous bits to realize that I could have fooled anyone in the school if I’d wanted to. Now I want you to think very hard and show me your best Dumbledore. I’ll turn around until you’re ready.”

Despite her unconventional means of teaching, Harry knew that Tonks had a point. He thought about Dumbledore. The hair was easy but the extra height was a bit harder for him. His weathered look was harder yet. After a few minutes he was satisfied and said, “Miss Tonks, you may turn around now.”

She looked closely at him and nodded. A moment later, she transfigured his gray robes onto a passable purple set that Dumbledore owned. After a minute, she asked, “Can you hold that form?”

Harry flexed his hands a bit and said, “I think so.”

“We’ll see. Spar with me a bit. No Reductos or unforgiveables please. Cor, I still want to be standing at the end of the duel. Walk to the other side and fire the first shot.” As Harry was walking to the other side of the room, she vanished the mirrors and the other furniture. Harry walked to the other side, turned around, bowed and fired a stunner at the floor. It bounced and nearly hit Tonks. She cast several stunners back one on either side of Harry who didn’t move as they passed harmlessly by. Harry conjured several snakes and set them on her. As she was dodging them, he conjured a dozen bats to fly at her. She disillusioned herself and moved to the side thinking that he wouldn’t hear her.

Unlike transforming with Polyjuice potion, Harry still had the hearing and reflexes of a teenager. As she carefully moved to the side to take

a shot at him from behind, Harry fired a stunner and hit her solidly in the hips.

Catching her before she hit the ground, Harry carefully laid her on the floor and revived her.

She blinked several times and rubbed her hip. "Cor Harry. That was some stunner. I was out like a light."

The old wizard nodded. "Yes, Miss Tonks. Mr. Potter told me about your little duel. You have been unconscious for two hours now."

Dazed, Tonks apologized. "Sorry Professor, I was trying to teach Harry." After a moment, she saw the grin on his face.

Tonks was a little mad, a bit embarrassed and quite impressed, all at once. "Good one Harry. Help a girl up, would you?"

Harry carefully picked her up and set her on her feet. "Very good, Harry. We'll try this again tomorrow and see what the Professor thinks. I'll turn around and you can change back."

Thirty seconds later, Harry was standing in front of her wearing his own gray robes.

She smiled at him. "Goodnight Harry. You did really well. I'm proud of you." She kissed his cheek.

"Thanks Tonks. "You always provide better encouragement than McGonagall. Dinner tomorrow?"

The offer delighted her, even if she had lost against little Hanna. "Please. Wear your gray muggle suit. You look great in it. I'll surprise you with a venue."

"OK. Goodnight."

She walked to the door, tried it and said, "Harry, you need to unseal the door."

-

Wednesday after breakfast, Harry went to Paris to find six pensives. He changed his appearance and thought it quite unlikely that he would be recognized. Twenty four thousand Galleons later, he was on his way again.

His time with Dumbledore was well spent. The old wizard had explained his plans for disseminating his estate and his vast knowledge. Against Harry's protests, Dumbledore told him that he was to be the primary beneficiary of his estate, except for the items that he would have personally given away by the time of his passing.

He also explained some of the differences in pensives. Dumbledore explained that the solicitor models would allow the memory to be projected much like a hologram, so more than one person could view it. They were typically limited in their storage capacity. He quipped that you could never have too much memory or storage capacity.

Harry returned about noon and had lunch with Ginny and Susan. They told him that since the weather was nice that day, they would ask the DA to go and practice their broom work again after the last class that afternoon before it got too dark.

-

Dumbledore found Harry and Tonks after lunch and asked if they could accompany him to the ministry. They visited with Minister Diggory and Director Bones for a few minutes. Dumbledore requested that Harry be given a permit to create portkeys and to set wards. Bones asked if he knew how to do either. Dumbledore replied that he intended to teach him both that afternoon.

Diggory explained that he had been unable to find anyone who could help with the Imperius curse. Harry suggested that he and Moody could show the Aurors the next two evenings if they could come to his classroom. He scheduled four evenings over the next two weeks.

Dumbledore asked if he could be allowed to visit Auror McKinney. Neither Bones nor Diggory objected. Harry and Tonks volunteered to

come with, but Dumbledore insisted on going alone. As Director Bones filled out the paperwork for the portkey creation, she explained that they were regulated and tariffed, so he would need to report on a monthly basis how many he had created.

As Dumbledore went to the holding cells he considered the damage that the caster of the Imperius spell had done. Not only had they mortally wounded him, but ruined the life and career of a very capable Auror. Aware of what she had done, she was terrified when she saw him, until he insisted that she was in no danger. Using Legilimency, he found what he was looking for and assured her that she would not be in a cell much longer.

Dumbledore returned to Amelia and advised her that it had been Narcissa Malfoy who had placed Auror McKinney under the Imperius curse. For their own sense of closure, he suggested that a small panel Wizengamot hearing be convened the next morning, McKinney be given Veritaserum, questioned, and released following the expected results.

-

At five, Harry met Tonks at the front entrance. She was wearing a simple black dress and flats. The dress looked fabulous on her and matched Harry's slate gray suit quite well. They portkeyed to the back of an Asian restaurant in Birmingham. It was a very safe choice. No one would recognize them and it was quite enough that they could properly visit.

Tonks started as they were served their Tiger beers. "You did a good thing yesterday with the professor. I'm really proud of you for taking such good care of him. I want you to know that I know that you did everything that you could for him." Her crystal blue eyes met his for a moment. "Harry, it's his time. You and I don't have our own philosopher's stone to give him, even if there was such a thing.

Harry smiled. He'd previously held one in his hand. "I know that you're right, but..."

“You don’t need to say anything else. Let’s talk about something else. Have you got any more duels planned, or are you just going to opportunistically keep chipping away at Voldemort’s forces?”

Harry smiled for a moment. “Dumbledore told me that he thought that Riddle resorted to having someone cast the Imperious curse on McKinney because he was running low on able-bodied flunkies of his own. I can’t see getting into a fight with him and a bunch of dementors at the same time, but I don’t know how to engineer a dementor battle in a contained area.”

She looked into his emerald eyes and tried to picture him as a twenty five father of a half dozen beautiful little witches and wizards. Steeling herself, she said, “Harry, I think you know how I feel. Whatever you decide to do, I will go with you. I will fight beside you. I will die beside you if we have to. Hopefully we can grow old instead. I won’t abandon you, and I won’t refuse you. You’re a good leader. I believe that you’ll become a great leader. All I ask of you is your continued honesty. Tell me what I can do to help you.”

Harry understood the level of sincerity and self exposure that she had just displayed. Like a precious egg, he held it carefully in his hand. He replied, “Tonks, I need you to always be honest and candid with me, even if it’s in private. You made corrections and challenged my original ideas about the duel with McNair. As a result, we had a safer plan that involved less risk.”

Like little Hanna had a day earlier, she beamed at him. Very few people in her life had taken the time to acknowledge her planning skills or efforts. She knew that he valued her much more than just a rack with a variable face.

They sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes. They’d had a wonderful meal. Finishing his Tiger beer, Harry said, “I’m losing one mentor. I’m just lucky to have so many great ones. Thank you, Tonks. What can I do for you?”

She smiled at him. “For now, one dance would be great, then we should get back to the castle. The next few days are going to be rough.”

-

Moody, Dumbledore, and Flitwick still had licenses from the last war to use the unforgivables in training purposes. Dumbledore doubted that he still possessed the stamina to repeatedly perform the curse. Flitwick really didn't have the stomach for it, leaving the most of the dirty work for Moody and Potter. However, the two worked very well together. Thursday evening, they began their lesson in Harry's classroom.

"Watch his eyes," said Moody to the class of nearly thirty Aurors who had gladly come for some additional training. "You can see him fight it and beat it. Watch." He pointed his wand at Harry and said "Imperio." Silently, Moody commanded him, Harry I want you to kiss Shackbolt. Go kiss Shackbolt.

After a second, Harry, thought, Why? He is good looking, but he's really not my type. He walked over to McKinney and kissed her on the cheek. "Sorry Kingsley, but Auror Karen here has a much prettier smile." They all laughed, and applauded. Few of them had ever seen the curse beaten, let alone with such ease.

Flitwick explained that the wash of good feeling from being exposed to the curse was designed to have the victim forget their consciousness. Harry then explained that the easiest thing to do was remember the word why, allowing you to find your self again and begin the fight for control of your own mind.

Moody cast the charm twice on each of the thirty Aurors in attendance. By the second attempt, a few of the Aurors could beat it. They decided to go a third round. Either because Moody was tiring, or the Aurors were getting better, more than half could beat the spell within a minute. The few that had beat it twice were excused from the next evenings session.

Karen beat the curse on the third attempt. She stayed after the class, thanking Harry and Moody for helping her. Harry told her that he was certain that she would do much better the next evening. After she left,



Moody said, "Good work tonight, Potter. You have a real knack for teaching people how to take care of themselves."

"Thanks," said Harry, rearranging his classroom. "I do like it."

"You should consider it as a career. A lot of people can be Aurors. There are damn few really fine teachers. You're one of them," he said, shaking Harry's hand. "You did a good thing tonight making McKinney feel a little better about herself. She's a decent Auror. It would be a damn shame to have her throw it away because she got beat once."

Harry nodded. "Good night, Moody."

The old warrior smiled at the young man with so much heart. "Goodnight Potter."

-

Friday morning, Tonks went with Harry as he demonstrated his morphing with Dumbledore. He was quite impressed when Tonks told him that Harry had dueled with her Tuesday evening while in his form.

Carefully considering what he had just seen, Dumbledore suggested that it might be advantageous if Harry made an appearance on Sunday as him. He suggested that Diagon Alley might be a good choice as he knew some of the shopkeepers.

-

A/N

It's going to be a busy month for Harry. Please review.

## Chapter 19

Saturday the apprentices and Tonks went to the newly reopened Three Broomsticks pub for breakfast. Ginny wasn't able to go because of her class with the DA. They were finishing when Harry remembered that he had to go pick up a cloak at Gladrags Wizardwear down the street from the pub. The attendant handed him his package and was making small talk when Harry began to have a strange feeling. Having learned from experience not to ignore strange feelings, Harry told the attendant to go into the back room and not to come out. She didn't have to be told twice, and was gone within seconds.

Harry left his package on the counter, and transfigured his gray robes into a magenta set, believing that they would be passable. Certain that the attendant was cowering in the back room, he morphed into Dumbledore's form and walked out the door. Every dementor in Britain was nearby! Harry used the canon blast charm, hoping that Ginny and the DA would hear it. The witches came out of the Three Broomsticks and from across the street Harry said, "On three. One, two, three." They each cast their forms. Only Harry, and Hermione had thought to bring their blood staffs, which would produce a killer strength form. The Patronus forms began their work.

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Meanwhile, Ginny was satisfied at the progress that the flying group was making. They did best when they were hovering and held their broom with their opposite hand while casting with their wand arm. The wand holders that Professor Potter had given them proved very helpful. She was about to send them back for the morning, when she heard the sound of the canon blast charm coming from the village. She was sure that it was Harry. In a command voice, she said, "Dennis, go tell the teachers that something is very wrong at the village, you others follow me. They need our help."

-

Back at the village, it was pandemonium. It seemed like half of the villagers had been outside and on their way when the dementors

swooped into the village. A dozen Death Eaters had followed them. Within seconds, a dozen villagers had been circled and were being kissed. It looked like this would be the end of the village. It looked like this time there was no rescue team. Then the villagers heard the canon blast, and once again, felt hope.

Having cast their Patronus forms, the dementors were beginning to waver when the broom riders arrived. Ginny and those that could cast a Patronus made an attempt to corral the dementors, while Harry and Hermione's giant forms began to cut the dementors to bits.

She saw a green jet flash by her side, and fired a Reducto blast back at the attacker. It hit and he went down.

-

Standing outside watching the action for a moment, Susan was grabbed from behind. Using the moves that Kingsley had shown them last summer, she sidestepped her attacker and gave her a kick to the stomach. Before the Death Eater could recover, Susan stunned her attacker. Remembering Harry's advice, she stunned the downed Death Eater a second time for good measure.

Harry and Hermione kept casting Patronus forms, but it seemed like there were fewer and fewer dementors. The foul stench in the cold air was disgusting, but to Harry, it smelled like victory. Hermione would have to talk with Harry another time to find out why he had disguised himself as Professor Dumbledore.

From her position, Tonks was watching Harry working in the form of Dumbledore, and trying to cover him. She saw someone off to his side raise their wand against them. "Reducto," they both said at the same time.

Like Dumbledore, Harry's attention was focused elsewhere when he was hit by the blast. Fortunately there were two differences. The villager who had been forced to cast the spell has not a powerful witch, and her spell really wasn't that powerful. Second, Harry was wearing his Hungarian horntail armor vest, which absorbed 95 of the blast.

Tonks felt sick as she saw Harry get hit and blown off his feet from the blast. She was amazed when he got up a few moments later, his cloak smoking from the blast. She called out, "Professor, you're on fire."

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Colin was busy taking photos from his broom when he saw Professor Dumbledore get hit. It had been good chance and habit that he'd brought his camera today. He had taken nearly thirty photos so far. With all the makings of a true paparazzi, he had just snapped another photo when a jet of green light hit the back of his shooting star broom. Somehow he managed to get close to the ground when the charms on the broom gave out. He fell the last fifteen feet.

-

Voldemort was shocked when he saw Dumbledore get up again after being hit with the Reducto blast. His sources had told him that Dumbledore was near death. He could see that the attack on the village had been lost, and did not wish to sacrifice the remainder of his Death Eaters on a losing cause. It had not been the brutal turning point in the war that he'd anticipated. He'd been certain that Dumbledore would have been holed up in the hospital wing, like a dying dog. Aside from the brainwashed villager, Riddle personally had only managed to kill two villagers and hit some idiot boy floating on a broom taking photos.

He apparated back to Riddle Manor and pressed the Mark, recalling the remaining Death Eaters. The dementors had largely met their match and the remaining ones would have to fend for themselves, or be killed. He would battle the old fool another day.

-

Harry felt terrible. He could hardly stand, and felt like he had been hit in the chest by an extra strength beater bat. He had a very difficult time breathing, and knew that he would collapse at any moment.

Tonks saw him waver, and knew that she would have to get him moved immediately. She called to Hermione to help her.

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Amelia Bones received the message that Hogsmede was under attack. She rounded up the dozen Aurors and four Mediwitches that were available, and quickly informed them of the situation. As she was speaking, she wished that they were equipped as well as Harry's team. She wished them well and they vanished. She prayed that she would see each of them again alive and whole at the end of their shift.

Several minutes passed, and she heard nothing. She decided to go and see for herself.

-

At the school, Dumbledore and McGonagall directed a school lineup to identify who was missing. Within five minutes, it was obvious that the apprentices, Miss Tonks, and fourteen members of the DA club were missing, and presumed to be engaged in the fight.

Dennis Creevey did not have the names of everyone who had been on brooms, but confirmed that Ginny, Colin, Neville, Hanna, Ernie, Terry and Michael Corner were among those who had been out training. Minerva asked that the students please return to their common rooms until lunch time.

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Pop, pop, ... pop!

When the sixteen Aurors and Medi-Witches arrived at the village, the carnage was sickening. There were bodies, walking wounded, dazed villagers and cloaks littering the ground everywhere on the streets of the small village. A horrible stench lingered in the air.

The Medi-Witches treated the wounded while the Aurors manacled the Death Eaters and rounded up those who had been kissed by the dementors.

When the final tally was listed, the Aurors were astonished.

146 dementors destroyed

18 villagers kissed

3 villagers killed by unknown means

2 villagers killed by killing curse

1 villager killed by Tonks (self defense under Imperious)

26 villagers with minor injuries sustained running away

4 Death Eaters captured including Narcissa Malfoy

2 Death Eaters killed including former Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge

1 student injured from a spell cast by a Death Eater

-

Amelia saw Tonks leading Dumbledore down the street. She went up to them and saw that Dumbledore was injured. Waving off her offer of help, Tonks explained that she needed to get him back to the castle right away. Amelia noticed that she was carrying a blood staff that was not hers, but elected not to say anything about it.

The reality was that she had never seen such a one-sided victory in her life. She would nominate him personally for the Order of Merlin First class, except she knew that he'd already earned one many years ago.

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Hermione rounded up the students and sent them walking back to the castle carrying their brooms. She wasn't sure if they would be cheered upon their return, or expelled. Unlike the first attack with the dementors, this time they really had no where to go, and most perished within 200 yards of the Three Broomsticks.

Silently she praised herself for having brought her blood staff along with her. She heard Tonks call her over to help someone.

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Ginny was carrying Colin's camera as she flew back to the castle. She met Flitwick, Dumbledore and McGonagall at the front door. They were astonished when she provided them with the details as she knew them. They could see the students beginning to walk up the front lawn to the castle. Behind them, Colin was being brought in on a stretcher in with a broken wrist, arm and shoulder.

Ginny was equally astonished. She had been all but certain that she'd seen Dumbledore in the village. In all of the confusion, she must have been wrong.

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After treating or transporting the injured citizens, the Medi-Witches had the unpleasant duty of transporting the eighteen dementor kissed citizens to St. Mungo's. Their families would be notified upon their arrival.

Most were amazed that there was a village to return from. They had heard that the heaps of black cloth lying on the ground had been the remains of at least a hundred of the hellish dementors. Whatever had destroyed them was power beyond their comprehension.

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The Aurors transported the captured Death Eaters, then they returned a second time to transport the dead. They returned a third time to bring the large pile of dementor cloaks back to the holding cells.

Finally Hermione and Tonks conjured a floating stretcher to carry Harry (still in the form of Dumbledore) back to the castle. About a hundred yards from the castle Tonks cast a cloud of fog around them to obscure the vision of anyone who might be looking at them. She said, "Harry, you have to change back now." With nearly all of his remaining strength, he changed back. She transfigured his robes back to the original gray shape and they continued their journey back to the castle. Understanding what had happened, Dumbledore retired to his quarters and changed into robes that resembled those that he'd seen Harry wearing.

-

Healer Crabtree had received word that Hogsmede was under attack by a large force. She anticipated a large quantity of casualties, perhaps as many as two hundred.. She had her aid go round up the other off duty healers in preparation for a very unpleasant morning. Within fifteen minutes, she had six additional healers on duty. When the wounded, and the citizens who had been kissed began coming in, she was sickened to hear that over a hundred dementors had attacked the village. She re-evaluated her estimate upwards to at least half of the village would be entering the lobby that afternoon.

She was amazed and delighted to hear that other than the eighteen villagers kissed, there were only a handful of people with injuries requiring advanced treatment. Rumors began to spread that Albus Dumbledore had almost single-handedly destroyed the dementors. Based on her examination of him a few days earlier, she viewed the report somewhere between amazement and outright disbelief.

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Rita Skeeter received word that Hogsmede had been nearly destroyed by a massive Death Eater and dementor attack. She grabbed Bozo and immediately apparated to the Three Broomsticks. By the time that they got there, the fighting was over and she was able to get a few photos of several of the Aurors, cloaks that were large enough to have belonged to dementors.



Bozo took another handful of photos of the injured citizens, but the real action was over ten minutes ago. He had missed the opportunity to capture what would have been priceless photos of the battle in progress.

This was probably the largest battle between the light and dark forces in her lifetime. Several of the villagers had told Skeeter incredible stories that the large pile of black cloaks being collected had previously belonged to dementors. That was preposterous. Everyone knew that you couldn't kill a dementor.

The villagers' stories were conflicting, but the common elements seemed to be that somehow Dumbledore seemed to have driven off over a hundred dementors and at least a dozen Death Eaters. Several even swore that they'd seen Voldemort himself. Fortunately no one had talked with the clerk from Gladrags who had been scared witless by the attack after having been warned by Harry Potter to go and hide.

-

The hospital wing of Hogwarts was busy, but not overwhelmed. Poppy was looking at Colin's shoulder when Harry was brought in on a stretcher by Hermione and Tonks. Setting Colin aside for a moment, she closed his curtain and went to examine Harry.

The witches had carefully removed Harry's shredded cloak and armor vest. Poppy was looking at him with concern. He had broken his sternum, and four ribs. Looking at his badly damaged vest, Susan and Hermione realized that he probably should be dead.

Hermione and Susan went to find her auntie and the house heads. They were meeting in Dumbledore's office with Tonks.

With some effort Dumbledore stood from behind his desk and greeted the young warriors. "Welcome back, Miss Bones and Miss Granger. You each reacted with admirable skill and courage. It appears that the group of you have secured a major victory against Tom and his followers. Please tell me what happened."

Susan spoke, "Hermione was awesome Professor! You must have seen her from the other end of the street where we saw you. Your Patronus charms met, like mine and Harry's did, and they killed all of those hideous dementors."

Hermione looked at Dumbledore, who nodded, but didn't say anything yet. They both knew that it was Harry who had cast the charms. He asked, "How is Professor Potter?"

Susan said, "He's badly bruised, has some internal bleeding, a broken sternum and a few broken ribs. He must have been hit with a bad spell or curse."

Hermione was going to say that he'd been saved by wearing his armor vest, but it didn't seem like the right time.

Amelia took her niece back to the common room. When they had left, the ancient wizard asked, "Who else knows about Harry's morphing this morning?"

Hermione replied, "To the best of my knowledge, Tonks, Ginny, myself, you, and anyone that you may have told. Based on her actions, I presume that Director Bones knows. Colin was taking photos Professor. I'm not certain where his camera went to when he was hit. He may have taken a photo of Harry morphed to look like you."

The ancient wizard nodded. "I believe that Miss Weasley has it. I shall get it from her. It would be highly advantageous to our side if the illusion of my health could be maintained for a bit longer. Thank you for performing such an admirable service in the village, Hermione. You doubtless saved dozens of lives this morning."

"Thank you Professor. I really appreciate it. If you have a moment this afternoon, I would like to show you the results of my research. I really would like you to see the possibilities."

"I would be delighted to. Perhaps you and the others would like to check in on young Harry. He does seem to have a knack for getting himself hurt."

She smiled sadly, having been dismissed. "Of course. Thank you, Professor."

-

Ginny found Harry in the hospital wing. "Harry, I didn't know that you'd been hurt. What happened?"

"I'll be fine in a bit, Gin. Madam Pomfrey has been taking good care of me, as usual. I should be up in no time."

"What can I do to help?"

"Six really squashy sleeping bags in front of the fireplace would be fantastic. I hope to be out of here in an hour."

Poppy came by. "You must be delusional Professor Potter. I hope that I didn't hear you making plans on leaving my company so soon. We haven't had a chance to visit much lately, and..." She smiled at him, knowing that he would be in very caring hands with the young witches. "Please be gentle with him, Miss Weasley. He was hurt rather badly this time. Please stop by and see me in the morning, Professor."

Harry thanked her again and they limped back to the common room. True to her word, Ginny transfigured six of the squashiest sleeping bags that there could be and gently laid Harry down on the floor in front of the fireplace.

She snuggled up to him as carefully as she could. As the other witches returned from lunch, they joined them, letting their magical energies co-mix. By dinner time, Harry was healed. He gently hugged each of the witches, and thanked them for helping him heal.

-

As they walked into the dining hall, the students and staff stood to honor them. Professor Dumbledore said, "I would like to honor the students and apprentices who so capably aided the villagers of

Hogsmede this morning. House points do not seem to be adequate for the occasion, so I will consult with your heads of houses and find something that would be more appropriate. Please enjoy your meal.”

After dinner, Dumbledore conferred with the heads of house for a moment. They nodded, and Dumbledore stood to address the students before they left for the evening. “Due to the unprecedented approval of the last informal dance, the other professors and I would like to announce another, next Saturday evening. You may attend by yourself or invite a partner as you wish. Everyone is welcome. Enjoy your evening.”

-

Inspiration comes at the strangest times. Harry got his thinking about the dance next Saturday. He decided that he wanted to think about the feel of the lovely women that he’d be dancing with, not Riddle. He excused himself and went to his room to write a letter.

Dear Tom,

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## Chapter 20

Might as well be a man about it, thought Harry. He chose his words very carefully to try and lead Riddle to a conclusion.

Dear Tom,

I was visiting with one of my friends last night and a thought came to me. You and I have never really been placed in a fair fight situation together. Surely you didn't consider trying to kill me at age one a fair fight, did you?

Using Quirrell to do your dirty work didn't really seem like your best effort. Maybe he was just too weak. Maybe you chose poorly. You would know better than I.

I hope you found out that I was ready to kick your sixteen-year-old arse when I was twelve. You demonstrated your perverted idea of a fair fight by sicking a forty-foot basilisk on me. By the way, once I killed the basilisk and got back to fighting just you, you went down with one hit.

We tried again when I was fourteen and had a broken ankle, but our wands seemed to be mismatched for fighting each other. Then again thirty-to-one seemed a bit perverse too. Bow my arse - you started early.

Last summer, I would have enjoyed getting into a fair fight with Bella. She went down pretty quickly when I cursed her. I suppose you miss her, don't you? She probably was the only woman who you didn't have to torture to get to open up to you.

Too bad. You should have seen her head bounce when I cut it off with a quick little move that Antonin showed me. It probably wouldn't have worked out with her sister either. Don't give it another thought.

So what do you say? I formally challenge you to a duel. Does one-on-one with pistols, or swords suit you better? Enfields or Colts, Katanas or Dirks? Any of them could work for me. Have you got any mates left? Maybe six-on-six with wands or sticks?

Could you even consider a fight without cheating, or will I need to watch out for a surprise attack from killer sea bass?

There are no tricks to this. My parchment doesn't have some hidden portkey. The owl doesn't have some homing charm. I trust that your reply won't either. There is some honor about a proper duel, don't you think. Give it a bit of thought. Leave a note on the door of the Three Broomsticks sometime tonight. It will get to me.

Next Saturday morning at 8:00. My venue, your choice of weapons. Let me know. I'll get back to you.

Harry Potter

Harry believed that he had at least an even chance with pistols. He had practiced during the summer and was accurate, even if he wasn't fast. Given that there had been no recorded use of a pistol in any of Voldemort's killings, Harry felt that he would have the advantage if they were selected.

With respect to swords, they were much closer to a traditional wizarding weapon. Harry felt very comfortable with either of the models that he had referenced. The shorter dirk would almost certainly involve injuries to both the victor as well as death to the loser. At less than 20 inches, it was very much an up close and personal weapon.

The one on one duel with wands was the fight that Harry didn't want to have. There was the issue of the brother wands, and the reality that Voldemort simply knew more fighting spells than Harry would.

Harry felt that a six on six fight could fairly certainly be won in an apparation proof setting. He was equally certain that it would involve serious injuries or deaths on both sides regardless of how much armor that he furnished. The prophecy was vague on this aspect. Harry's magnified power in the presence of those that he loved was most likely the power that he knew not. However the prophecy did not specify that Riddle would be beaten by that power, rather that it existed.

Asking the others to join him in such a duel was out of the question. Harry even had doubts that he would be comfortable if the others volunteered to stand with him.

Harry selected one of the school owls at random, and asked her to be extra careful. She looked at him, and nipped his finger before taking off into the late January evening.

Harry went to find Moody and told him that he'd need his services tomorrow morning before breakfast.

Harry walked the halls of the castle for a while after releasing the owl and talking to Moody. The wheels were in motion all right but which way would they turn? Had he just taken the steps to actually having a life worth living, or simply signed his own death warrant? He walked back to the room, and put on his game face. He spent the next hour quietly watching the fireplace. The witches assumed that he was still hurting and let him be.

Katie and Tonks were discussing the Puddlemere United team while Hermione was engrossed in her research. Susan and Ginny were playing a game of chess together.

It seemed like there were a lot of unspoken subjects hanging in the air – Dumbledore, the day's events, Voldemort's reaction, and the dance. Little had been said about any of them.

In reality, they were waiting for some guidance from Harry. Their enrollment in the apprenticeship program seemed to be unraveling, and no one had yet spoken with the witches about future plans.

Regarding the attack, it was apparent that there was some secret between Harry and Dumbledore. Hermione, Tonks, and Ginny knew about Harry's morphing ability, while Susan and Katie did not. For a man who was so critical about others keeping secrets from him, Harry seemed to be mastering the habit himself.

At nine, Harry went back in front of the fire and tried to get some sleep. He was very sore, and more than a little nervous about the next day.

In spite of the best efforts of the five women in the room, (Katie had begun to spend Friday and Saturday evenings with the apprentices) Harry did not sleep well that evening. As with Dumbledore, the wheels of his fate had been set in motion.

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Dumbledore Minerva, and Moody looked over the photos that had been developed from Colin's camera. The first few were innocent enough, showing the students on their brooms. The fifth photo would strike terror in anyone's heart. Colin had taken a photo from about 300 feet of the village. A careful count identified well over a hundred dementors and at least an equal number of villagers out in the streets. Looking at it, Minerva marveled that there had been any survivors, let alone a stunning victory.

The next few photos were similar, but in greater detail as Colin had flown lower. Several Patronus forms were visible. The next few illustrated the dementors being scattered by the forms. There was a photo of Ginny Weasley casting a Reducto charm at someone.

It was the last four photos that were truly interesting. One showed Hermione casting a giant Patronus. Another showed Susan Bones stunning a Death Eater that turned out to be Narcissa. The third one was likely the only one of its kind in existence – a clear photo of Voldemort taken from about 75 feet.

The final photo showed Dumbledore casting a Patronus. There were two unusual details of the photo that caught Minerva's eye. The form that was cast was a stag, and the Dumbledore in the photo had two arms.

"Interesting photos, Dumbledore," said Moody. "The Creevey boy can probably sell them to the Prophet or the Quibbler and retire off of the proceeds."



“Would you like to explain the last photo, Albus, or should I simply ask Mr. Potter?” Minerva didn’t know what to think, and wanted to hear it from Dumbledore himself.

Dumbledore replied, “Harry and Miss Tonks share an extremely rare skill. Yes, that was him, but for now, I would like to leave the wizarding world with the perception that they have. The photos indeed have significant value and rightfully belong to Mr. Creevey. I don’t think their value will diminish much in a few days. As such, for now, I would like to leave them in my office, and ask that you do not mention Harry’s gift to anyone.”

They nodded, and bid the old headmaster a restful evening.

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At 5:00 Harry woke up. In spite of not sleeping much last night, he found being in the proximity of the five young women quite comforting. They had somehow all managed to hold him somewhere during the evening, an arm, a toe, or even his hair. Carefully avoiding everyone, he got up, showered, and dressed. He put on his Horntail trousers and the remains of his old vest, wishing that he’d thought to order two last time. He’d have to try to get another this afternoon. Picking up his blood staff, he opened and quietly closed the door.

Hermione, Susan, and Ginny watched him leave in silence. Adjacent to each other, they held hands as he closed the door. There was no rivalry today. They knew that they all loved him, and each prayed that he’d return soon and whole.

He met Moody at the front door. There were no smiles. Moody had guessed what Potter had done, and was not being judgmental about the young man who had the courage to actually do what few would even consider, and most of the skills to back up his actions.

They walked the half mile to the train station in silence and stopped. Moody carefully looked around for a few minutes before proceeding. They walked to the Three Broomsticks.

Tacked to the door was a letter that simply said Potter.

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Harry looked around in the early morning light, but saw no one. He glanced skyward, but saw no one. He didn't want to grab the letter and be transported back to Riddle Manor or the Little Hangleton graveyard, but he didn't want to wait around and have either of them be targets either.

Meanwhile Moody was running his eye and wand over the envelope, still tacked to the door. There were no traces of curses or jinxes on the envelope. He could see no runes, and judged the envelope to be a reasonable risk to touch. He made to pull it down, and Harry stopped him.

"I'll get it Moody."

"Let me help, Potter. I know it's ultimately your fight, but I'll help."

Harry understood that Moody's days as an active warrior were over, but he still wanted to remain useful. Without being patronizing, Harry said, "OK. Thanks."

Moody carefully picked up the envelope and placed it in a plastic bag. He handed it to Harry.

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On the way back, Moody asked, "Is that from Riddle?"

Harry replied, "I expect so. I challenged him to a duel."

Moody was silent for a minute. He had known many brave men in his life, but he had never heard those words before in connection with Voldemort. Rather than say something judgmental or trite, he asked, "What can I do to help?"

"I'll read his reply and have a better idea. I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't mention this to anyone today."

Moody nodded. "I understand. Do you want to walk around more, or should we go back in?"

In truth, Harry did want to be alone for a bit to collect his thoughts. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Thanks Moody. I'll find you and let you know what he said."

"You're welcome." The old warrior limped back into the castle. He carried himself with more pride than he had in years. Potter wasn't letting him hang around out of sympathy, or memory of what he had done, rather respect for what he could do.

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"You what? Are you mentally defective, or are you under the Imperious curse?"

"Probably."

The lithe witch couldn't think of a response, so she slapped his face, surprisingly hard. She was so angry at him. How could he do this to her? Didn't he love her? Didn't he know that she loved him?

As he walked away, she stood there speechless with tears rolling down her cheeks, splashing on the stone floor. As he turned the corner, a howl of anguish was building up in her. She slumped onto the floor and wept.

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## Chapter 21

He reread the letter.

Potter,

I'm rather impressed. Swords or pistols? Wands and/or staffs? As my response, you select any two and we will flip a coin on Saturday for the final selection. I assume that you have a sufficient supply of each. In the event that you select wands, and they are chosen, I would defer and allow you to select any two wands other than yours or my own. Please bring your wand. It will make a wonderful souvenir for me to hang on my wall after you are dead.

You are indeed a capable young wizard. Should you decide that you do not wish to risk losing your life next Saturday morning; I will offer you one last opportunity to join me.

Six on six? That too would be a very tempting offer. Who would you choose? Would you subject your closest friends to almost certain death, or optimistically rely on five people who may be less inclined to sacrifice their lives for you as others have in the past. Perhaps the old fool and his Order of losers would volunteer to be buried on Sunday along side of you.

Of course, several of those that I may have wished to have at my side are most likely unavailable. Since I am giving you the choice of weapons, I reserve the choice to flip a coin for the determination of a single or group duel on Saturday morning.

I expect to hear from you by noon on Friday regarding the venue. You may send your reply via school owl or announce it in the Daily Prophet if you prefer.

The Dark Lord

Moody put the paper on the table. "You've got a steel pair, Potter. No one will ever deny you that."

Harry rubbed his forehead. This was a lot more complex than setting up a one-on-one duel with McNair.

Sensing that Harry was actually looking for guidance, Moody said, "I have three questions for you - What are you best at? Do you have five people who would stand by you and not distract you in a fight? If so, what are they worst at?"

Harry explained his thoughts on each weapon. He didn't bring up fighting as a team.

After carefully listening to him, Moody suggested that they go and talk with Dumbledore.

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Albus Dumbledore was surprised that Harry would initiate such a move, but impressed in the way that Harry had framed the offer. He agreed that a one-on-one duel with wands would be Harry's weakest move.

After discussing the different plans for nearly an hour, Dumbledore took Harry completely by surprise by saying, "Harry, if you would have me, I would volunteer to stand by you next Saturday." Even more surprising, Moody made the same offer.

Harry had been unprepared for this response. The plan seemed better when he was originally writing the challenge than when sitting in the headmaster's office waiting to be scolded. Sensing Harry's hesitation at accepting such an offer, Dumbledore said, "Harry, you should consider your options. We can talk more about this tomorrow."

"Thank you sir. Thank you both. You both mean more to me than you could know."

The ancient wizard nodded and replied, "Enjoy your day, Harry."

"Moody growled, "Potter, we meant what we said."

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The young tailor at the armor shop was not surprised to see Harry walk through the doors. "Good afternoon, Mr. Potter. I have a pleasant surprise for you. Another Horntail died and this one has the thickest hide that I've had the pleasure to work with."

"Good," replied Harry. "I'll buy the entire hide, and provide specifications at a later date. For now, I would like your best vest and trousers in my size as soon as you could begin them."

She smiled at him. "For some reason, I knew you'd be here today." She handed him a large package from beneath the counter. "Thank you Mr. Potter."

Harry smiled at her. "Thank you Nikki."

She beamed at him, not thinking that an important celebrity like Harry Potter would remember her name. He seemed so nice. "Mr. Potter sir, would you mind if my mum took our photo together in your armor?"

Harry smiled at her. "I wouldn't mind, but please don't show it to anyone for a few weeks. OK?"

She understood the implication of his words, and nodded. "It won't fail you sir. I promise."

He kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks. That means a lot to me. I'll stop by again and just visit. Bye."

She smiled and waved as he walked out the door.

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"Can we read his response please?" asked Katie respectfully. Harry took the letter out of his robe pocket, set it on the table and sat on the sofa by the fireplace. Winky brought butterbeers for everyone.

"Why Harry?" asked Hermione willing herself to suppress the tears in her eyes.

“We’ve been very fortunate lately in our battles,” said Harry. “I wanted to choose the time and place for this and if possible, even up the odds a bit. I want to be at the dance next Saturday and be thinking about lovely women, not worrying about who Riddle will go after next.”

“That’s fine if you win Harry,” said Ginny. “What happens if...?” Tonks cut her off. The fifteen-year-old witch was crumbling under the stress of the situation. Negative self-talk would get them nowhere.

“I’ll stand by you Harry, if you’ll have me,” said the young Auror.

There was silence for a moment. The witches weren’t certain if Harry would be grateful for their help, or push them away like he was prone to do.

As the silence continued, Hermione stood next to Tonks and said, “If you’ll have me, I’ll stand by you. I’m seventeen. I can legally duel.”

“So am I,” said Susan. “If you’ll have me, I’ll stand by you.”

Katie stood by her, winked at him and said, “So am I. If you’ll have me, I’ll stand by you Harry.”

Ginny ran from the room in tears. She was still fifteen, and her mum would never give her permission to duel with Lord Voldemort. In truth, Harry, didn’t want to risk getting her hurt either. Not knowing what to say, he let his girlfriend run down the hallway sobbing.

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Moody filled Dumbledore and Minerva in with the details of the challenge as he knew them. They began discussing the different possibilities.

“So who would he bring on his side?” asked Alastor.

Dumbledore replied, “Likely Voldemort would select Zabini or another duelist from outside the country. I expect that he would recruit someone that would be an expert in each of the weapons that Harry

has offered up. For sake of discussion, two handgun aficionados, two warriors of the blade, and two of magic. On the other hand, it is possible that he would select several people that Harry would not wish to hurt and place them under the Imperious curse.”

Minerva asked, “How could he be countered?”

Moody replied, “One strategy would be to limit the number of bullets in each pistol to two. I do not know the skill of the young witches in swords or handguns. They each own good armor that would probably stop a pistol round from 30 yards.”

Minerva said, “He could be double-teamed.”

Dumbledore nodded in agreement. “True. As Tom will doubtless do against myself.” He hoped that Riddle would go after him first, allowing Harry one last opportunity to kill the Dark Lord.

Minerva asked, “Who would stand by Potter?”

“Alastor and I already have offered to.”

Minerva observed, “Certainly Miss Granger and Miss Tonks will offer. Miss Bell and Miss Bones might offer to as well.”

Dumbledore thought for a moment. “They all would offer themselves. Remus and Kingsley would volunteer as well. Arguably Miss Weasley is not of age and cannot be allowed to get involved.”

Moody replied, “True, but that didn’t stop her from killing a Death Eater last weekend. I assume that this is being held as a legal duel?”

Dumbledore nodded yes. “It is said that most golf matches are won not on the links, rather before the match starts by negotiating the terms of the wager. Harry has presented quite an interesting challenge with four elements to be selected - the venue, the weapon pool, the potential team and then singles or team. If we presume that the only real mismatch would be Harry and Riddle one-on-one with wands, I would suggest that he select pistols or staffs.



Dumbledore continued, "If we select pistols, Riddle would probably go one-on-one and lose. If we select staffs, he probably would prefer to go teams and at least fight to a draw, depending on who he selected to stand with him."

Moody replied, "Since Potter can select the venue, I would suggest that it be warded to his advantage. He's taught his team to be nimble where as the two of us are not. It is legal in a duel to ward the area as long as the wards that are used are announced to both parties."

Minerva asked, "Did Potter specify blood staffs, or sticks like quarter staffs?"

Dumbledore replied, "I have not seen the original letter."

Minerva said, "A blood staff is arguably a stick, whereas a stick would not necessarily have to be a staff. Perhaps the Weasley brothers could be enlisted to create some similar looking items."

Moody stood to leave, and had a final comment. "It's Potter's fight. Maybe we should wait to offer any advice that he actually asks for."

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By dinnertime, the rumor was all over the school. Whether she meant to or not, Ginny had spilled the beans about the upcoming duel. With each retelling, the story grew wilder, but the core facts remained that Harry Potter had challenged you-know-who to a duel and the leak originated from miss Ginny Weasley herself.

By 9PM on Sunday, the rumor had effectively spread to every witch and wizard in Britain.

By 10PM, Molly and a host of Ministry officials were giving Ginny a face-to-face howler of the worst sort. By 11PM, even Molly was talked out, but Director Bones was ready to keep Ginny locked in a Ministry holding cell for a week to keep her from blabbing any of the other details that might hurt Harry's chances.

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Harry had all but made his mind up. If needed, his six-on-six team would consist of:

Albus Dumbledore

Hermione Granger

Susan Bones

Katie Bell

Nymphadora Tonks

Harry Potter

Harry would again ask Moody to referee the duel. He would ask Professor Flitwick to charm the coins so that they couldn't possibly be tampered with. In the event that Professor Dumbledore was not able to participate, Harry would ask Kingsley as he was skilled in both weapons. Remus and several others had offered to stand by him, but Harry knew that he would be strongest with the witches in the event that Riddle selected staffs.

His choice of weapons would be swords or staffs. He honestly felt that he could beat Riddle in a one-on-one fight with swords, and each of the witches could handle a blade better than most wizards. He would allow the rumor to spread that he had requisitioned twelve Colt model 1911 pistols from Director Bone's group. Harry made certain that pistol shots could occasionally be heard from the Hogwarts grounds to provide substance to the illusion that Harry and the witches were practicing with handguns. Harry hoped that Riddle might load his team with a bunch of pistoleros who couldn't swing a sword.

Based on what he had told Riddle, Harry owed him an announcement of the venue by noon Friday. Harry's announcement of the two weapons and the ultimate flip for them as well as the quantity of duelists would be announced and take place on Saturday morning.

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At nearly midnight on Sunday evening, Dumbledore summoned Minerva, Filius, Remus, Kingsley, Moody, and Minister Diggory to a meeting to update them.

He began. "Good evening. I have asked to you come tonight to share the little knowledge of the situation that I do have and gather your input regarding how we might best help Professor Potter in meeting his prophesized destiny."

He looked at each of them and said, "It is indeed Harry's destiny that he should meet and hopefully defeat Riddle. It was foretold nearly seventeen years ago. That in fact was Riddle's quest a year ago in the Department of Mysteries last June, to obtain a recording of the prophecy." Those that had heard of the prophecy and the details of the DOM battle nodded in comprehension.

He continued. "Harry has issued a legal challenge to Riddle to duel with a clever set of terms including Harry's choice of venue. Harry mentioned a selection of muggle and magical weapons in his challenge letter. He will provide two sets of weapons of his choosing. Riddle will flip a coin for both the final choice of the weapon and the choice between a team duel, or one-on-one. If teams are selected, each side will have six members."

"The parameters of the duel itself have not been announced. They could be last person standing, or the death of the principle, or an announcement of a yield. Given the nature of the situation, I presume it will be to the death."

He continued, saying, "The venue itself could prove either a distraction or advantageous, depending on the weapon selected. One suggestion that I received was the Quidditch pitch, or a stadium. The reality is both the light and the dark side would likely wish to have witnesses. It would be necessary to prohibit wands or weapons of most of the spectators."

Amelia said, "It would also be advantageous to Harry if there were anti-apparation and or anti portkey wards in place in the fighting field. What Harry would want on the actual field of battle remains to be seen." She had not mentioned her anxiety over Susan's probable participation in the event.

Amos said, "What about offering some of the captured Death Eaters as potential team mates?"

Dumbledore asked, "Why do you suggest that, Amos?"

Diggory replied, "Some of them have more skill at talking in court or making threats to weaker people than fighting. In fact, I'd suggest that many would fit that mold. There's a difference between being a cowardly killer and a skilled fighter. We could know of Potter's final weapon choices by then, and offer up some candidates who might not have a true expertise in that area."

Remus said, "That might eliminate his using truly qualified people in favor of people that he knows. He probably believes that he doesn't really need teammates." The others nodded in agreement. Neither Bones nor Diggory had aspirations to join Potter on the field of battle, but their ideas could improve his chances.

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At about the same time, Harry heard a soft knock on his door.

"Harry, can I come in and talk"

"Sure what's up?"

"Harry, I am willing to fight and die by your side if it comes to that, but I'd rather not die as a virgin. Would you spend the night with me and make love with me? Please? I'm not asking for any promises, or anything beyond tonight, but the reality is that we might not be in a position to do this next week and I want to know what it's like."

Harry looked at his friend for a moment, and knew that she was sincere. "Close the door."

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When Harry woke up at four the next morning, he was alone in his room. He showered and went to his classroom after getting dressed. Hermione and Tonks were practicing thrusts and blocks with the wooden swords.

Susan and Katie arrived a few minutes later. He showed them blocks and had them focus on them with the idea that they could use them to stall for time. He asked them to recheck their armor and let him know that day if there was any damage so he could get them a replacement set if needed.

Ginny was still with her parents and would be there for at least the rest of the week. Diggory had initially directed Bones to press numerous charges against the girl, but had been talked out of the most serious charges by both Bones and Dumbledore. He might be right, but he was quick to act and judge. Stern words from Mrs. Diggory had finally caused him to reconsider.

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It was truly unfortunate that Ginny had blabbed. The Ministry and the school were inundated with inquiries, expressions of concern and support. Collectively they were causing both organizations to lose focus.

On Monday morning, Dumbledore pleaded with the students to leave Professor Potter, the apprentices and the staff alone with respect to the subject. The available members of the Order were recruited to sort through the stacks of mail that were collecting in the Owlery. After they were done sorting the mail, Remus visited the twin's shop and Ollivanders. He explained what he wanted and they promised to have everything ready by Thursday evening.

It seemed that every owl in Britain was flying a message either to Scotland or London. Rita Skeeter and numerous other reporters tried unsuccessfully to gain access to Harry, but were blocked at the front doors of the castle.

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The first year students in Harry's class accepted what they had heard much easier than most of the adults. They had absolute confidence in their professor. Some of the girls giggled and asked if Harry was going to dance with Hanna next Saturday night. Harry smiled at the little witch and nodded.

Harry deviated from what he had planned, and discussed the basic rules of a wizards duel. At the end of the class, he shook everyone's hand, and they each wished him well. Hanna and most of the little witches gave him a hug. A few had tears of concern in their eyes.

Harry promised them that he'd be careful.

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On Monday evening, there was a knock on Minerva's office door.

"Come in."

Harry opened the door. His Professor and good friend saw him and immediately invited him in. "How can I help you Mr. Potter? Please have a seat."

Harry carefully displayed two swords that he had brought and drew them from their sheaths. "I would be honored if you would transfigure twelve copies of each of these swords Professor. I need them to be as perfect as possible, and..."

She looked at him with the utmost respect, honored that he would trust thousands of lives with her work. "I understand Harry. Please show me the details that are important."

Harry showed her the important points of a katana sword – the point, the edge, the grain of the steel blade, the blade back, the tang, the hand guard and the laced grip itself.

Minerva carefully studied the weapons that he had shown her. An hour later, she had made thirteen copies of each of them. As he was getting ready to leave, she pulled him into a hug, and wished him the very best.

"I won't let you down, Professor. Please keep the extra copy of each sword."

"I have absolute faith in you Harry. I will keep the extra copy in case you need it. You'd best get going now." She tried hard not to sob in front of him. The possibility of losing the two most important wizards in her life in one afternoon was too much for her.

Harry carefully took the weapons back to his classroom and practiced several test cuts with each sword into straw bundles. The blades were quite sharp and appeared to be quite strong. He decided on using the katanas rather than the dirks, hoping to avoid injury to the witches.

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As requested, Ollivander had created ten staffs. While not as powerful as a blood staff, they were more generic and much more likely to respond to a user that they were not specifically made for. The woods and lengths varied slightly.

He finished them Tuesday evening and would deliver them in the morning. The old wizard hoped that he hadn't created another murder weapon for the Dark Lord.

Fred and George had contributed something equally useful. They produced eight walking staffs. They looked very similar to the blood staffs that the apprentices had produced, but were nothing more than carved sticks of wood. If one of Voldemort's side selected them in an attempt to deny the apprentices of their own staff, they would be in for a very disappointing afternoon Harry showed them to the witches so that they could see the small differences between the copies and their own staffs.

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Wednesday after dinner, Dan and Emma Granger were escorted to the door of Harry's classroom. Emma was about to knock, but realized that the teens were practicing. They watched in awe as their daughter flashed her sword with amazing speed and grace, sparing with a large black man in Auror wear. Susan and the others were of equal finesse and obviously well skilled. Amelia had brought over the best swordsmen on the Auror squad to spar and coach the apprentices and Auror Tonks.

The two dentists had never intentionally enrolled their brilliant daughter in a military academy. They had come to realize that her world was in a civil war and accepted that their daughter had volunteered to help win it.

Their attitude had changed greatly the last summer when Voldemort and his minions had killed twelve people and destroyed their home while attempting to murder their family. They had accepted Harry's lead and trusted him with everything that they had. Like the parents of the other witches, they hoped that someday Harry would return the love that their daughter felt for him.

After the teens were done practicing, Dan, Emma, and Minerva visited with Hermione and Harry. They held each other and spoke softly. The Grangers would not be watching the duel; rather they would be waiting for their daughter's safe return in the castle.

Hermione and Harry both promised to be careful and to watch out for each other. Harry and Minerva waited outside the door while Hermione spent a few tearful moments alone with her parents. Each promising that they'd see each other on Saturday afternoon, they parted company.

Hermione slid under the covers and snuggled with Harry. The flaming passion that she wanted to express with him was tempered by their sheer exhaustion from their training and the crushing stress that they each felt. If they went six on six and were evenly matched with their opponent, they each had a fifty percent chance of winning. She mentally estimated to odds of flipping six coins and having each coin



come up heads at less than two percent. She vowed to come up with a plan to raise the odds.

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Dumbledore had been putting his affairs in order all week. Assuming that Harry was successful, Minerva would be announced as Acting Headmistress of the school on Sunday. It had been recently anticipated that she would be named Headmistress at the end of the school year. Few people knew the true extent of Dumbledore's wounds.

Headmistress was not a position that she honestly aspired to, but she was willing to accept it in a stewardship role. She knew that the school thrived while under the tenure of truly great leaders. She prided herself on being an excellent instructor, a fair head of house and a competent administrator, but deep down, she knew that she was a follower, not a leader. Dumbledore had serious doubts that he would see the ceremony.

Albus and Aberforth had taken the red Corvette that Harry had given him out for a ride. Remus had been right. Traveling the highland roads at 130 MPH made it clear to both brothers that it was a much different vehicle than Albus' old Desoto. At the end of the day, Aberforth accepted the keys from his brother and offered his best wishes.

Dumbledore made certain that he spent at least a little time with each individual person on his staff. Harry had made him a series of two-way portkeys, so he could get to Diagon Alley as needed without tiring himself too much.

Harry and Dumbledore spent an hour together overlooking a bluff in the Scottish highlands. He told Harry of times that he'd spent there as a young man, typically in the company of a spirited young woman. Dumbledore encouraged Harry to build a family, or an extended family of his own. While polygamy was accepted in the European wizarding world, serial monogamy was not uncommon, nor was the practice of keeping a mistress. None of those practices fit with Harry's image of his own parents.

Both men felt like they had the distribution of their estates documented to their wishes. Dumbledore was fairly certain that he'd seen his last Sunday. He hoped that if a team duel were selected, he would still have the strength to shield Harry one last time.

Like the wizards, each of the witches had documented their last wishes and filed the paperwork with Harry's estate goblins at Gringotts. While refusing to believe that they would be defeated, filing the paperwork placed the stark reality of the possibility right in their faces.

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Thursday after dinner there was a knock on the door of the apprentices' common room. It was Director Bones. She asked to speak with Harry for a moment on official business. The witches went out to Tonk's living area to give them some privacy.

Amelia began, "Harry, regarding the selection of team duelists, I have a proposition for you. I know that you helped my family obtain some closure with the capture of Malfoy and Rookwood. I would like to offer you the same. I would like to offer the conditional release of, Lucius Malfoy, Draco Malfoy, Antonin Dolohov, Michelle Edgecombe and Peter Pettigrew. If Voldemort flips for teams, they might be a better choice than the mercenaries that he undoubtedly has collected. Dolohov and Malfoy are accomplished swordsmen. The others aside from Draco would have had little if any formal instruction with a blade. The downside is that collectively, they might represent a stronger than average team in the event that staffs are selected. Defeating them might give you some additional closure."

Harry understood the spoken and unspoken implications of her words. The five Death Eaters were known commodities and arguably a safer bet than five hired assassins. The Death Eaters could be counted on to follow Voldemort's directions, even going against their better judgment for individual survival. Finally Harry knew that as long as the Malfoys and Dolohov were alive, they would pose a threat to the decent folk of the wizarding world. Their death in a duel would be

seen as nothing more than their bad fortune, whereas Bones really did not possess the authority to have them executed.

Harry understood her reasoning and agreed to allow them to be offered as substitutes before the weapons were announced.

Harry asked about Ginny. Amelia said that she was still being held under house arrest at the Weasleys charged with endangerment of Ministry officials. Harry requested that she be released. Amelia offered to release her at seven in the morning on Saturday. In truth, she still believed that Ginny represented too much of a distraction to safely be reintroduced so soon before the duel, and did not want to pile additional risk upon her niece.

After leaving Harry, Amelia went to spend a quiet hour with Susan.

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Most of Colin's photos were returned to him. A complete set was made for Harry, the other apprentices and Amelia. She used it as the basis for preparing the lengthy Order of Merlin paperwork. She prayed that the awards would not be given out posthumously.

True to expectations, the Daily Prophet offered Colin fifty thousand galleons for the photos! He immediately accepted the money only to realize later that he could have received double that amount and had been seriously taken advantage of.

Creevey's father had always been amused by his son's obsession with photography. He was astonished to hear that Colin had been offered the equivalent of ten years of his regular salary as a milk deliveryman for one roll of film.

Minerva was besieged with requests for tickets to the duel. It seemed like it was the wizarding event of the century. The part that she found ironic was that if Voldemort were to win, almost every witch or wizard there would certainly be killed or tortured.

The Hogwarts Quidditch stadium held a mere 600 people. She decided to allocate 150 tickets to students to be given away on a drawing basis. The apprentices were allocated 50 tickets as were Voldemort's side. McGonagall had a mental image of a muggle wedding with the usher asking the guest, Are you a friend of the light or the dark side? She shuddered to think of anyone who would come up to claim them. Another fifty were allocated to friends of the school or the press. Having learned something from Fred and George over the last year, she placed the remainder for sale. She originally was going to price them at a hundred galleons each. Moody suggested that she add a zero, and use the proceeds to set up a substantial scholarship fund.

She contacted Skeeter about the offering.

Skeeter realized that a stadium the size of the one set for the world cup would have been more appropriate strictly from the point of the quantity of people who were interested in watching the duel. She immediately purchased ten tickets and resold them for five thousand Galleons each.

The board of school governors were each sent two tickets. Of course they each sent back replies asking for many times that number.

By the end of the day, Minerva had collected 300 sacks of gold, and had a waiting list for nearly a thousand people who just had to be there. An evil thought slipped in her mind, half wishing that at least one stray shot would get past the barrier, no never mind.

She had the embarrassing moment with Harry asking him if there was anyone who he wanted to give his tickets to. He asked her to save three seats in honor of his parents and Sirius and do with the rest whatever she felt best.

Ten of Harry's tickets went to the teachers and the rest were given to the Order, the other apprentices and the DA.

Amazingly the friends of the dark side tickets did get claimed. She carefully kept track of each of the names of those requesting a ticket, and then they were also gone.

...-----...-----

During the week, Harry spent some individual quiet time with each of the four witches discussing anything that the witches wanted, or just quietly comforting each other. Friday evening, they all spent the evening together. Collectively they prayed that the outcome would be favorable to their side. Their magical energies became one. Satisfied that they had done everything that they could to ensure their success and their safety, they rested in each other's arms.

While Harry and the witches finished their training, Ginny was a howling ball of sorrow. She realized that she had impulsively made a life changing decision by abandoning Harry and the others a week earlier. Unable to communicate with the apprentices while under house arrest, she realized that she had made a horrible mistake, and prayed that someday she'd have the opportunity to properly make up with Harry.

Molly believed that Harry's actions were too dangerous for her little girl to have anything to do with. She did not encourage Ginny to have any immediate contact with Harry, or the others, believing that the ministry should be dealing with him, not a handful of school children.

...-----...-----

A/N

The setup is a bit different, the battle was expanded and the aftermath is completely different. I hope that you like it. If you're looking for something to read, consider looking at Ri-Kun;s story Harry Potter and the Daughter of Darkness.

Should Molly have let Ginny into the fight?

## Chapter 22

At 8:45 AM on Saturday, Tom Riddle and five followers had arrived. They had apparated to the Hogsmede station, and walked to the Quidditch stadium. In an obvious respect for their ability (or a simple sense of simple self-preservation) no one bothered them as they approached.

Harry and his team were already there. Dumbledore had to be helped onto the edge of the pitch. He told Harry that regardless of the outcome of the duel, he knew that he'd spent his last evening in a bed, and asked Harry not to grieve for him. He thanked Harry for being so dedicated to helping the wizarding world.

To make the scene more believable, the team (if teams were selected) would walk out, arm in arm. It would appear to be nothing more than a show of unity. In reality it would help position a very feeble Dumbledore where he needed to be.

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The witches and wizards attending the duel as spectators were all told to check their wands and other weapons at a booth that had been set up. It may or may not have been a good idea, but there was every attempt made to keep the duel on the floor from spilling into the stands.

Several of the Aurors would be testing the wands during the duel to see if any had recently fired an illegal curse last. It was somewhat likely that a few dark witches or wizards could be captured if Harry were to win.

The Aurors dreaded thinking what would happen if both Dumbledore and Potter were to fall in one day.

Several students had received detention and sent back to their rooms for attempting to resell their tickets. They would not enjoy their punishments of cleaning the splattered viscera from the walls of Quidditch pitch walls at the end of the duel.

The duel was being covered live on the WWN. The commentator had been attempting to interview anyone who had known Potter. They couldn't find too many people who claimed to be friends with Voldemort. The members of the DA group and Harry's students refused to say anything before the duel.

Hagrid had been instructed to collect the bodies after the end of the duel. He hoped that the bodies that he had to collect weren't Harry and the Professor.

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Moody explained the specifics of the venue. The fighting floor had been charmed not to allow apparation, and a ceiling had been charmed twenty feet above them to not allow spells to accidentally hit any spectators.

As they were about to enter, Minister of Magic Amos Diggory approached them. In a rehearsed, steady voice he faced the man who had ordered the execution of his son. He said, "Tom Riddle, if you would prefer, I am prepared to offer you a swap of your original teammates for some captured Death Eaters should they be selected via the coin flip. It is our desire that they be executed, rather than allowed to serve life sentences, and allowing them to fight this morning would afford the Ministry that chance. They are all in fighting shape, I assure you."

He continued, "In the event that the duel does go to teams, and you win, they will be allowed to leave, as the wanted men and women that are you, but you would all be allowed to leave. We will offer you the team of Lucius Malfoy, Draco Malfoy, Michelle Edgecombe, Antonin Dolohov and Peter Pettigrew."

He took a steadying breath and faced the evil man asking, "Do you agree to these terms?"

Riddle thought about it. The mercenaries that he had been able to procure were each acceptable duelers. Two of them were accomplished in muggle weapons, as were Dolohov and to a lesser degree Pettigrew. Dolohov was very well versed in blade weapons as

was Lucius. All in all, the Death Eaters would be better in wands or staffs than the mercenaries that he had brought, and they would follow his instructions to concentrate their fire on Dumbledore and Potter. He said, "I agree. Let it be said, if you wish to remain alive, you will address me as Lord Voldemort in the future." Diggory had nearly voided himself meeting Voldemort's gaze.

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Harry looked up at the packed stands for a moment in silent amazement. Were there really that many witches and wizards in the world that had a death wish? If the dark side were to win today, all of the spectators in the stands would be in mortal danger. Harry vowed not to let that happen.

Moody eyed each of the duelers and checked for hidden weapons. Neither side had brought any. They were led to a table at the center of the pitch. In a magnified voice Minister of Magic Diggory announced, "Harry Potter has selected swords and staffs as the pool of weapons. The final weapon choice and the choice of single or a team duel are to be determined by coin flips. Lord Voldemort which would you prefer to be called first?"

Moody thought, Lord Voldemort my arse. Snake face would fit better.

Riddle wanted to give the prisoners as much time as possible to acclimate themselves to the area should they be selected. He said, "Flip the coin for single or team matches."

Diggory showed them the silver coin that Flitwick had charmed with anti-manipulation charms. It was a fair coin. One side showed a Harry Potter's head, the other side showed a group of witches and wizards, and the date. They both examined the coin and agreed that it was a fair coin. Diggory tossed the coin into the air.

It landed with the group of witches up.

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Draco Malfoy had been surprised when their normal prison routine had been altered earlier that morning. After eating, they were handed their black robes back and allowed to dress. Draco could hardly walk he was so stiff at the thought of possibly being in another duel, standing side by side with the Dark Lord himself.

His arrogance never allowed him to consider that he hadn't even held a wand in the last six months. Only one thought burned in his mind. Potter and the others would be made to pay. The imprisoned Death Eaters were led into the floor of the pitch and re-united with their master. They were announced by name. The crowd in the stands was silent as they were announced.

The witches and wizard who had volunteered to stand by Harry were led into the pitch and announced. The ceiling was charmed to that the spectators could hear the magnified action on the playing field, but the duelists could not see or hear the crowds in the stands cheering for Harry, Dumbledore and the witches.

Diggory showed Riddle and Harry the other coin. On one side it had a pair of unsheathed Katana swords. On the other it had two crossed staffs. Even the merchants, the Weasley brothers had created a limited edition run of five thousand sets of the commemorative coins that had been snapped up at a mere fifty galleons each. Diggory flipped the coin.

Staffs came up.

Diggory showed them the staffs. There were ten identical staffs that Ollivander had made, five from the apprentices, the one Dumbledore had brought, and six similar looking walking sticks.

Diggory explained that the side would take turns selecting one staff at a time. He told them that the ten from Ollivander had a neutral core that any witch or wizard could use. The blood staffs would either work better than average or hardly at all, depending on the fit to the witch or wizard. The six walking sticks that had been seeded into the group were simply sticks designed to keep Voldemort's team from trying to take the apprentices staffs.

From a strategy perspective Riddle knew that his team could either attempt to deprive the others of their staffs, and possibly gain an advantage. He knew, as Diggory had stated that a bad fit would result in a nearly useless piece of wood. He advised his team to take the Ollivander staffs. One by one, they drew their staffs. Each side was led to an area where they could safely try their staffs out for a minute.

While the rules of the match had been stacked largely in Potter's favor, the fact remained that they were facing the most feared wizard in any of their lifetimes. In reality, at least six, perhaps most of the duelists would be dead within minutes.

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Harry made an attempt at lessening the tension that the witches were showing and went into the Oliver Wood pre-quidditch game pep talk. "All right. This is it."

Having recognized the words, Katie laughed as she added, "The big one."

Even Hermione had heard the words before as she smiled and said, "The one we've all been waiting for."

It had worked. As much as humanly possible, the tension that they each had felt evaporated. One last time, they all smiled at each other. Dumbledore smiled at the leadership skills that Harry possessed, and hoped that they would be enough.

When they were called, they walked out arm in arm and gave a brief wave to the crowd. They were ready.

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LM, DM, TR, ME, PP, AD – Voldemort's lineup

100 feet

KB, SB, NT, HG, HP, AD – Potter's lineup

They lined up side by side, each witch or wizard spaced about five feet apart facing the other team.

Lucius Malfoy, Draco Malfoy, Tom Riddle, Michelle Edgecombe Peter Pettigrew and Dolohov stood side by side on the dark side.

Lined up on the light side were Katie, Susan, Tonks, Hermione, Harry, and Dumbledore. The two teams were about a hundred feet from each other. Dumbledore had suggested the lineup, believing it would present the greatest difficulty for the Death Eaters in the opening volley. Both sides had briefly discussed that they would do and who they would aim at. Harry's team had something of an advantage as they had pre-planned the match-ups and overall strategy.

Moody fired a pistol into the air to signify the start of the duel. He would use it on anyone he found to be cheating. They began.

Tick.

Malfoy, Malfoy, Riddle, Edgecombe, Pettigrew, and Dolohov each aimed a killing curse at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore cast a protective shield in front of Harry before he was hit four times and fell without so much as a groan. The greatest wizard of the twentieth century was dead.

Hermione had fired at Dolohov, Susan at Lucius, Tonks at Draco, Katie at Edgecombe, while Harry aimed at Pettigrew. Unprotected by any shields due to their focus on getting rid of Dumbledore, they were each hit and fell, either dead or seriously wounded.

Tick.

There was no medical attention provided until one side either yielded or no longer existed. Draco Malfoy had cast his final spell and would bleed to death within a minute after being hit. There was no arrogance in dying in your own feces.

There was a fist size hole in Dolohov's chest. He was dead before he fell. Susan had aimed carefully and hit Lucius in the left side of his

head. His last thoughts were splattered on the ground. Edgecombe was hit in the upper chest by Katie's shot. The internal explosion caused massive tissue loss. She was unconscious, bleeding out and would be dead within two minutes.

The rat that had betrayed his parents had drawn his last breath. Pettigrew, hit in the navel by the full force of Harry's Reducto blast from his blood staff was on the ground in three pieces.

Tick.

Riddle was amazed. He was certain that at least half of Potter's team would focus on him and had been ready to flatten himself on the ground in an evasive move. The old fool had died defending a boy that no one had bothered to target.

Riddle suddenly realized that the inability to apparate had now placed him at a serious disadvantage. With nowhere to run and no remaining followers, he decided to take Potter out and take his chances with the witches' aim.

The second volley was quite different. Harry and the four witches stood facing Tom Riddle. They stared at each other for an instant, then fired. Harry, Katie, Tonks and Susan aimed and fired Reducto charms at Riddle while Hermione cast a shield in front of Harry.

Riddle's powerful spell burst through the shield, deflected and weakened only slightly by it and unfortunately hit Harry squarely in the chest. He had dodged the spell, not knowing that Hermione would cast a shield in front of him in an attempt to protect him. Harry was knocked backward thirty feet by the impact, as if hit by a canon ball. Not knowing if Harry was still immune to them or not, Riddle had not fired a killing curse, rather a Reducto charm like the others had used.

Tick.

The combined spells of the three witches and Harry had cast blew the unshielded Thomas Marvolo Riddle into a dozen pieces.

Tick

Examining and stunning each of the bodies for safety, Alastor Moody declared the duel to be over.

Tock.

The duel was over, but at a terrible cost. Amazing almost everyone, it had lasted no more than five seconds. Hermione's pre-match strategy had largely worked.

In the end, Riddle and the five Death Eaters were dead, and four witches were still standing.

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Poppy had been placed in charge of a dozen Medi-Witches. She had prayed that their services would not be needed that day on their friends. They had previously arrived at the Quidditch stadium and had set up in the light side locker room. They had created a half dozen portkeys that would allow them to transport a patient directly into the hospital ward.

Watching from the side, she was amazed at the speed and brutality of the duel. Just seconds after Moody's pistol shot, the duel was over. The four witches ran to Harry who was laying on the ground at an odd angle. She and the other Medi-witches ran onto the field.

Six of the Medi-witches looked at the Death Eaters, one went to Dumbledore while Poppy and the rest went to look at Harry. He wasn't breathing.

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Nikki the armor tailor and her mum had been invited to attend. She knew that she had provided Mr. Potter and the brave witches with the very best body armor that was available anywhere. She had pointed out the different witches to her mum before the duel started.

They were seated next to Hanna Smith and Gretta Wood, students in Professor Potter's first year defense class. Both of them had absolute

confidence in their professor, and had fun telling Nikki and her mum that Professor Potter was their very favorite teacher. Nikki hoped that the little witches still had their favorite professor on Monday.

Nikki was horrified when he-who-must-not-be-named fired a Reducto blast at Harry. Nearly as powerful as the blast that Harry had fired to save the students at the Three Broomsticks, Harry had been thrown about thirty feet. He wasn't moving, but she didn't see a large pool of blood like the others had shed when hit.

Like most of the others in the nearly silent stands, she prayed for his health.

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Hermione was not going to let her best friend get killed. With all of her might, she had cast a protective shield in front of Harry. She was horrified when she saw the shield shatter, Voldemort's spell deflected, hitting her best friend as he was tossed backwards like a rag doll. She only hoped that it had helped reduce the awesome blast that Voldemort had fired.

Turning her attention for only a moment, she saw that Voldemort and the others were finished. A step behind the others, she ran to Harry.

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Relegated to the stands, Ginny Weasley had felt humiliated to be sitting in the stands between her parents like a little child.

She would never forgive herself for having told Lavender about the duel. She watched horrified as the apprentices rushed to Harry's side. Susan started mouth to mouth in an attempt to get Harry to breathe. The others held him while the Poppy healed a nasty gash on his left arm.

Before either of her parents could react, Ginny ran down the stands to the locker room.

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The Hospital wing was a somber place. The body of Professor Dumbledore had been brought in and was on the bed next to Harry. Poppy had known that one way or another, both men would have ended up here. A part of her had hoped that Dumbledore would have passed peacefully in her hospital bed. Yet she knew that his greatest desire was to help Harry rid the world of Voldemort.

She and the other healers had carefully examined Harry and believed him to be mortally wounded. While he might be dying, he was unconscious and at least resting in peace.

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Outside, Hagrid placed the remains of the fallen Death Eaters on the far side of the pitch. He carefully collected the different weapons and placed them in a locked trunk, as he had been instructed. He carried Voldemort's pieces over to the pile with a shovel and urinated on the body.

Taking his time, he thought of the taunting that he had received from Tom Riddle over the three years that he had been a student and the years after, while he was working as an apprentice for Ogg the gamekeeper. He had known McNair, both Malfoys, Edgecombe and of course Pettigrew the traitor when they had spent their respective times as students in the castle. All of them had harassed him at one time or another. He poured ten gallons of the light kerosene on their remains and fired sparks at the pile until it burst into flames.

Five minutes later, the fire was still burning high with a sickening black smoke and an very unpleasant stench. With his faithful dog Fang at his side, the gentle man walked back to his cabin to wait. Like the others, he hoped that somehow he would hear good news about Harry.

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Remus sat with Kingsley. He had been aware of the extent that Dumbledore had diminished and realized that it was only his

awesome reputation that had caused all six Death Eaters to fire at him in the first volley.

He had watched as Hermione had produced a powerful shield to protect Harry, and sickened as he saw his young friend tossed backwards like a kicked football. Like Nikki, he hoped that the Hungarian horntail armor had done its job.

Kingsley did not share his friend's optimism, but diplomatically remained silent. He wished that they would have drawn swords instead.

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A/N

The last two chapters end quite differently than the endings that were previously posted. I hope that you'll like them.

Could Molly Weasley ever mind her own business?

Has anyone read the Canadian editions? Are they different than the US editions?



## Chapter 23

About two that afternoon, Harry woke up.

His feet hurt, his legs hurt, and his chest felt like it had been run over by a steamroller. If possible, even his eyelids hurt. He felt a soothing weight on his legs. "Hello Fawkes," he whispered.

Poppy had, of course been keeping an eye on him. She smiled at him for the briefest moment, and then in her sternest voice said, "Please display even the slightest respect for my profession, and do not attempt to move for the next hour." In truth, she was surprised to have the opportunity to talk with Harry again. She originally had expected that he would have died within the hour, yet he seemed to have stabilized and possibly even improved.

Through badly swollen eyelids, Harry attempted to look around the room. Tonks, Ginny, Susan, Katie and Hermione were sitting by his bed, each holding him somewhere. It was Ginny who spoke first. "We love you too much to let you die on us." She closed the curtain around his bed and they unbuttoned their robes. For fifteen minutes they made skin to skin contact with him as softly as five young witches would be able to.

Harry was comforted by the soft sound of their breathing as they gently pressed themselves against him. After fifteen minutes, his eyes were no longer swollen shut. Both sides of his chest were healed, internal injuries were righted, and his hip and femurs were no longer broken.

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Poppy was hovering outside the curtains, half amused at his "treatment," half wondering how it could possibly work. Twenty minutes after pulling the curtains closed, Ginny opened them, and the witches allowed themselves to be scooted over to the other side of the hospital wing.

Poppy waved her wand over Harry to re-examine him in utter amazement. When he had been brought in, he had twenty-two bone

breaks and wasn't expected to live another hour. Now she couldn't find anything seriously wrong with her favorite patient. Looking at him in affectionate professional interest, she asked, "Professor Potter, how did you do this?"

His only reply was a single whispered word, "Magic."

He was still very tired, and in a lot of pain, but he was whole again. He gave her half of a smile and held his hand out to her. She took it and held his hand. Five minutes later, Harry sat up, and asked if she could help him into the bathroom.

Harry came out a minute later, still quite unsteady on his feet. Tonks went out and let Remus and the others know that Harry had woken up. The other apprentices led him back to his reserved bed, closed the curtains behind them, and resumed his treatments.

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The two little witches would not be deterred. At three, they both managed to sneak into the hospital wing past the big Auror who had been guarding the door. They were shocked at what they saw their professor doing.

Harry Potter, who had been brought to the hospital wing six hours ago, unconscious, near death, barely breathing, with arms and legs at odd angles was sitting in his bed playing a game of chess with Madam Pomfrey! His bed really did have an engraved nameplate on it.

Susan saw the pair, knew how much they were worried about Harry, and waved them over. With a smile she invited them to hold onto Harry's arm or wrist to help him heal quicker. Harry introduced Hanna and Gretta to Pomfrey who shook her head slightly and gave Harry a highly indulgent smile.

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"He'll be there, I promise you. He'd want you to do it."

“Auror Tonks, you can’t possibly be serious.”

“I assure you Headmistress, Professor Potter will be at dinner and the dance this evening. That was his original reason that he challenged Voldemort to the duel. He didn’t want to have anything to worry about tonight.”

Minerva looked at Tonks in amazement. Following Poppy’s orders of no visitors, she had not yet seen Potter, and did not know that at that moment, Poppy had just taken Harry’s knight. McGonagall replied, “If you are certain... Professor Dumbledore left specific instructions requesting that the dance be held as scheduled. I just thought that under the circumstances...”

Tonks smiled at her. “It’ll be perfect. You should inform the different heads of house. We need to get ready. Six PM, correct?”

In her highlands accent, McGonagall replied, “Right.”

It was three PM.

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The witches arrived back at their rooms to find that several packages had been left for each of them. They each had notes from Dumbledore congratulating them on their success. He thanked them for not abandoning Harry in his hour of need, and wished them a fruitful life and happiness.

They had each received a beautiful set of slate gray silk robes with an embroidered phoenix on the collar. Helping each other with their hair and nails, they had finished getting ready in record time. Ginny hadn’t spoken to the other witches, but they hadn’t noticed.

At five PM, Remus and Amelia were sent to collect Harry, and helped him back to his room. He showered and put on the new robes that the witches had laid out for him. Five minutes later, he slowly walked out of his room. The five witches were standing outside his door waiting for him. Each was so beautiful. Remus took dozens of photos.

Amelia opened a bottle of champaign that was sitting in a magically chilled ice bucket and poured them each a glass. She raised her champaign flute and simply said, "Cheers."

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Together they walked to the great hall. As if waiting for a bride to walk down the isle, the staff and students were standing as Tonks and the Apprentices passed through the doors and walked down the fourteen steps to the tables.

Minister of Magic, Amos Diggory had a few words before they sat. He began, saying, "There will be many opportunities to celebrate the defeat of the dark side, but not tonight. There will be opportunities to remember our losses, but not tonight. There will be opportunities to recognize Minerva McGonagall as Acting Headmistress, but not tonight. There will be time to listen to speeches..."

The students cut in, "But not tonight."

Slightly red-faced, Diggory said, "Right. Enjoy your evening." He then sat down.

Other than Dan and Emma Granger, there were only a dozen visitors to the castle that evening – Remus, Kingsley, Amelia, Healer Crabtree, M/M Diggory, M/M Weasley, the twins, Alicia, and Angelina. By popular demand, the string quartet that had played at the last dance had been invited back.

Harry sat between Dan Granger and Arthur Weasley at dinner. Both fathers attempted to lead the conversation around to the, Now what? line of questioning. Harry had focused his last year entirely on getting to this evening, and aside from a few conversations in his business finance class, or the last week with the Professor, his future had never really been thought through. He simply wasn't ready to have a conversation regarding the rest of his life.

He liked the mental image that he'd just had. The Professor. He did not grieve the loss of Dumbledore today. The reality was, he had

been murdered two weeks ago, and just took a while to pass. He had almost certainly lived the life that he wanted, except for the regret that he mentioned about having no family of his own. The Professor had always envied Arthur Weasley. He had certainly married a spirited woman and created a dynasty in terms of love.

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Whereas most of the young wizards had decided to leave the apprentices alone, the young witches sensing the not-yet-healed rift between Harry and Ginny all seemed to believe that Professor Harry James Potter was fair game again. Ginny fumed as witch after witch came up to Harry, “accidentally” dropped something and leaned over him to retrieve their lost item, giving Harry embarrassing views. As Cho proceeded to rub up against Harry, Ginny lost it.

“Get your scrawny arse away from my boyfriend, Chang.”

Every eye in the great hall turned her way. Remus was heard to say, “Oh Shite. Here it comes.” And come it did. For several minutes Ginny proceeded to drag up every bit of dirt that she could recall about every female in the room. Depending on your perspective, it was highly amusing, terrifying, or utterly embarrassing.

Then she turned on Tonks and the other apprentices. “What were you thinking of, sleeping with my boyfriend while I was out of the castle?”

From there it got ugly. Tonks and Susan started shouting back that she had been no help during the duel, she had risked all of their lives by giving away highly confidential information, and that they had done just fine without her. Katie suggested that she should still be under arrest.

The lithe Redhead was furious. “You will regret saying that Bell, for the rest of your...”

**B O O M !**

It had been over a hundred years since a wizard of Harry’s power had fired off a canon blast charm from inside the castle. Everyone’s ears

were ringing. Long settled dust was raised from rafters, filling the air. Those who heard it hoped that it would be another hundred years before it happened again. It made the sound of a howler seem like a joke.

Using the Sonorous charm, Harry imperiously said, "Silence." "Too many people here owe me life debts as it is. No one owns me, nor do I own any of you. If you feel the need to argue, take it outside. The Quidditch pitch is empty, and Hagrid still has more kerosene." The disgusting stench and smoke of a thousand pounds of incinerated flesh was still fresh in their minds, and Harry's words struck true.

The witches were all embarrassed at their behavior. A minute later, Headmistress McGonagall asked that the quartet resume playing.

The truth was that they were all stressed out way past any reasonable breaking point. Rather than play favorites, Harry just stood on the dance floor like a bride at a dollar dance, and spent a few moments with any witch that wanted a chance to visit.

Hanna and Gretta were first in line. They beamed at their favorite professor and told them with absolute confidence that they knew that he'd kick old snake face's arse.

Near the end of the line was Molly Weasley, demanding an explanation about what had been said. Harry gave her a hug, and pleaded with her, "Molly, I've had a really hard day. Can we talk another time?" Surprisingly she gave him a very cold look, and they parted. Harry began shaking from stress.

A minute later, he went to McGonagall and asked if it would be possible that she find a substitute for his classes the following week.

Not really hearing what he'd asked her, she said, "Of course, anything."

.-.-.-

Having a keener eye toward people's emotional health than most of the witches or wizards in the wizarding world, Dr. Emma Granger,

had been watching the apprentices, especially her daughter and Harry, closely all evening. These kids had been thrust into a situation where thousands of lives were in the balance and had to make split second decisions to kill or be killed. Her own daughter had killed a man today. Where was the team of counselors that anyone would have expected to be on hand to help them?

Hermione was on the dance floor weeping onto her father's shoulder. On the other side of the floor, Ginny was doing the same. Sitting near her, Susan was sobbing, being held by her Auntie.

The apprentices were literally coming unglued.

Unnoticed, Harry went back to his room, found his staff, his katana, some cash, his vault key, a few papers, and quietly walked out of the castle. He may have just won a war, but to him it seemed like nothing was right. He felt utterly alone.

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A/N

What does a real Headmaster really do? There is the referenced board of school governors who presumably hire a headmaster and have overall budget authority. Did Dumbledore single-handedly hire everyone, or did he have help? Who selects the curriculums? Would McGonagall make a great Headmistress?

Very few stories mention the need for post-traumatic stress counseling for the teens. Hopefully JKR will provide Harry with a more skilled ear than going to Hagrid's hut.

## Chapter 24 & Epilogue

No one had ever prepared him for the “and after that?” part of his life. Harry felt like he was walking around with a fist-sized hole in his own chest. Honestly he had no idea how to fill it. He wondered how many more Death Eaters he would have to kill to ease his own pain.

He walked out of the castle to the train station and apparated to his home.

Ears still ringing, Minerva decided that she needed some time to regroup before resuming school for the children. She contacted the school governors who immediately agreed, and announced a two week recess before second term would resume. The students would be sent home the next day.

Harry asked Dobby to go back to the school and bring him both of his pensives. With a pop, the little elf was gone. A moment later he returned. Winky would stay at Grimmauld Place with Harry, but Dobby had business back at the school.

At 11PM Hermione came into the entertainment room at Grimmauld Place, found Harry, and asked if she could stay for a while. She told him that school had been put on hold for two weeks, and most of the students would be going home the next morning. Harry didn't think he would be very good company, but invited her to stay as long as she wanted to.

They sat by the fireplace watching the fire in silence, drinking. Hermione put on one of the CDs, The Goldberg Variations, and they sat in comfortable silence listening to it, each lost in their own thoughts.

When it finished an hour later, Harry said, “I can't imagine how he did it.”

It seemed like a rather open ended statement. Hermione didn't have a clue what he was referring to. Softly she asked, “Who?”



Harry replied, "The Professor. I don't understand how he could turn his rage on and off again, just like that."

She replied, "He had plenty of time to perfect it before we came along. Maybe it took him a lot of years to get it right. He was in his nineties in 1945. We're teenagers"

Harry said, "Dumbledore must have felt the same thing. He mentioned the rage that he felt after killing Grindelwald when we were talking last week. It wasn't just something that could be turned on or off like a light switch."

She said, "Maybe he didn't. What did he leave you in your pensieve? I haven't finished looking through mine yet, but there's been some really useful stuff. Maybe we should take a look."

Harry replied, "Maybe. Dobby brought them over just before you came. I'll go get them." Harry came back a moment later with the solicitor pensieve. He tapped it with his wand and poked around at the memories until one felt right. He tapped the start rune. The images came up and displayed like an eight-foot hologram.

A fifty year younger Albus Dumbledore much like the one that he'd previously seen in Riddle's diary had slipped into a castle in Bavaria in early 1945. Dumbledore had used his wand with a slashing movement much like Dolohov, dissecting anyone who got into his way.

Climbing what seemed like hundreds of stairs, he stopped outside a large wooden double door. He silently drew a .45 automatic from his pocket and quietly opened the door. Grindelwald was seated at a high backed leather chair watching a fireplace. He never noticed Dumbledore slip in. Dumbledore aimed carefully and fired, hitting the wizard in the back of the head. He walked up to the dead or dying man and fired seven more times until the man no longer had a head.

A moment later, Dumbledore set fire to the room and the rest of the rooms as he walked purposefully back down the stairs. When he got to the front door, he sealed them shut and lit several more fires to the building, torching it.

He apparated several miles away and cried uncontrollably for several minutes until Professor Dippet appeared next to him and told him that it was over. Dumbledore had done his part, and that it was time to come back home to the castle. The image faded.

They sat in silence for a moment, trying to reconcile the profound level of violence that they had witnessed for the last half hour against the kind and loving man that they had almost always seen.

After a few minutes, Hermione asked, "Why do you suppose that he left you that memory? It was obviously very painful for him and it must have been in his nightmares for years. Merlin, it gave me the creeps just watching it, knowing that it really happened. He must have killed about fifty people and one evil son of a witch that night." She was visibly shaken, and tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"Maybe to let me know that it was possible to get through it, but to let me know that he didn't do it alone. I dunno."

"Can I sit by you?" she sniffed.

"Please." Harry put his arms around her, to comfort his best friend. For several minutes, they just sat in silence, each afraid to let go.

A few minutes later Hermione asked, "Do you want another butterbeer?"

"Please. Do you? I'll get them."

"That's OK. I'm up."

She put another CD on and picked four butterbeers from the icebox. When she came back, Harry was watching the fire again. After a few minutes he said, "We went bowling together a few weeks ago. He kicked my arse."

Somewhat surprised at his words, Hermione exclaimed, "I didn't know you bowled?"

Harry chuckled and replied, "I don't. I never had done it before that night. He was good enough to keep the game close without making it too obvious. We had a lot of fun together."

Still holding him, she replied, "I miss him too. The witches from your class were sure happy to see you this afternoon." She didn't want to talk about Dumbledore at the moment.

Harry nodded his head and smiled. "I was happy to be seen. I thought I was toasted when your shield deflected that blast and it hit me. I was lying there after I woke up, replaying the scene in my mind. I had been sure that I'd moved out of the way. It's a good think that Nikki made a good vest."

Hermione nodded, tears welled in her eyes.

He finished his butterbeer and started on another. Both of them were a little drunk. Harry continued saying, "It was so different from play duels when we were kids. I practiced once with Ron in third year. We must have gone on for fifteen minutes before either of us connected. The thing today lasted for what – four or five seconds? We fired. Men died. We fired again and finished it."

She sat in silence, waiting for him to finish his thought. After a minute, he said, "I understand why the professor shot him over and over. I wish I'd had the chance."

Hermione looked sadly at Harry and asked, "To kill him over and over?"

Harry nodded, and replied, "Yes."

A month ago, his words would have shocked and scared her. Now they made perfect sense. She said, "If it's any consolation, Moody did it for you. I'm sure Hagrid took some pleasure in lighting the pyre for you. It's OK to share the load. Susan, Tonks and Katie hit him too. He deserved it. Thanks for letting us help you. It brought a lot of closure for me, and I'm sure that it did for the others too."

Hermione continued, saying, "I wanted nothing more than to protect you. I felt terrible that my shield broke and deflected the blast to hit you. I'm so sorry."

Harry held her in comfortable silence for a minute then replied, "I'm fine. Don't worry."

It was almost four. They both had been quiet for a while. Hermione stood up and said, "It's late Harry. Let's get some sleep." She held out her hand to help him up. They went upstairs, got undressed and climbed into bed together. Hermione spooned up behind Harry, kissed the back of his neck, placed her hand over his heart and he immediately fell asleep. She whispered, "Good night, Harry." He finally stopped shaking.

A new day would soon be dawning.

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Harry listened to Diggory, Moody, Amelia, Hagrid, and Minerva speak at the memorial service for Dumbledore on Monday. They each took a few minutes to offer their views of the great wizard and great man that he was. It really wasn't a sad occasion, so much as a remembrance of a man who had lived to see a fantastic amount of change in the world, from horse drawn carriages to Corvettes.

Harry was disappointed to see that Ginny and Mrs. Weasley weren't there. They hadn't spoken since Saturday night. Fred and George were evasive when Harry asked. "We're not sure, mate. They're probably not feeling well."

Harry went to find Arthur after the service. "Hi, Mr. Weasley."

Arthur looked uncomfortable. "Hello, Harry."

"What's wrong, Mr. Weasley?"

Mr. Weasley looked like he was trying to avoid saying something that would hurt Harry's feelings. He said, "Molly and Ginny are reacting badly to... They just need a... I really don't know Harry... Molly is

very upset over things that she heard and hasn't sorted them out. Reporters from the Prophet and a dozen other papers or magazines are hounding them."

A moment later he continued. "I think they feel like everything is crashing down on them at once. This last year has been a lot to take in. I don't blame you for anything, Harry. I'm grateful for everything that you've done for me and my family. Ginny made some mistakes and doesn't know how to make them right. Perhaps you should try and see Ginny tomorrow for lunch."

"Thanks, Mr. Weasley." Harry went back home, not certain what to fix, or how to fix it. He missed Ron.

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## Epilogue

New Year's Eve 2000.

He had never really to set things right with Ginny or Molly. Harry had lunch with them once about a week after the duel and tried to explain the situation. "We were under so much stress. How could you ever judge us without spending five minutes in our shoes?" His words fell on deaf ears, they both slapped him, and they parted their ways. Harry unsuccessfully tried for a month to make up with Ginny. Either she was set in her opinion that Harry should have somehow prevented her significant problems with the Ministry, or that he'd taken advantage of her somehow, or she had just cracked under the stress. They just couldn't seem to reconcile. She had broken up with him by owl several hours after the memorial service to everyone's sadness. Harry greatly missed the guiding hand that Dumbledore had provided in his life.

Molly insisted that Ginny return to the regular school program, and she finished out school with her class. She never completely got over the stigma of national traitor when people ultimately realized the seriousness of the information that she had given out. The story of Harry being prophesized as being the only one who could kill or be killed by Voldemort quickly came out. The importance of keeping

secrets and the old adage, "Loose lips sink ships" continued to haunt her. When everything was sorted out, she had revealed the weapons that they had been training with and the armor that they had been using. It had been the worst day of her life and she had simply succumbed to stress and youth when she had run into Lavender.

Shortly after, there had been some movement within the Ministry to sack Arthur, but Harry publicly stood behind him, effectively preventing it from going any further. Harry never blamed Ginny for anything, as he understood the stress that they had been subjected to. Molly continued to blame Harry. She had grown bitter over the loss of Ron and for some reason transferred the blame to Harry. Harry was never welcomed back into Molly's home. He didn't blame them, and he would always help them in a blink if they ever needed it in the future. Ginny married Lee Jordan a few months after graduating and was expecting her first child.

Harry and the other apprentices, left school at the end of the school year. Susan went to work as a trainee at St. Mungo's. She married Neville immediately after he graduated. Katie married Seamus at the same time. She had asked Harry to give her away as her parents were dead.

Hermione went to post graduate school for two more years specializing in advanced charms. Like the others, she tried to get Ginny to reconcile with Harry, to no avail. She began dating Harry at the end of the school year. Initially they had simply accompanied each other to the dozens of functions and banquets that had followed the duel. Eventually their relationship progressed to more, and a year later, they were married.

Together they had two children and four Order of Merlin awards. They lived at the mansion together with the other witches and their husbands. The third floor training room had been converted into a children's play area. The young mums spent time in the park together and remained friends. Harry served the wizarding community as a justice for the Wizengamot. It wasn't more than a part time job, but it got him out of the house. Despite many offers, he had yet to find a permanent career.

Tonks remained close to the group. She stayed working in the ministry despite numerous offers from Harry to set her up in any business venture that she may have wanted. Simply spoken, she liked her work at the Ministry, and had been promoted to Senior Auror.

Hermione worked part time at the St. Mungo's spell research center. She was still close to her very supportive parents. She and Harry had a daughter and a son together. They were both beautiful little children. She was eternally grateful that her mum had advised her to "Go after him!" when Harry had left the dance that night. She realized that her decision to go and comfort him was one of the defining moments in her life. She occasionally regretted that she hadn't made up with Ginny, but kept trying to hold the door open.

With Harry's help, Katie had purchased and was managing the Chudley Canons. They'd completed their first winning season in Hagrid's lifetime. She and Seamus had two little boys together.

Harry did enjoy setting up his friends in profitable business opportunities. They hadn't all worked, but he felt like he was making the world a better place by trying to help people. His latest venture had been to set Neville up in a thriving herbology business.

Susan worked part time at St Mungo's delivering babies. She had delivered both of Hermione's and Katie's youngest. She and Neville had a boy and were expecting their second baby in the summer.

Amelia retired from the MLE directorship and was enjoying being a grandmother. Kingsley was heading up the group and was a very capable director.

Fred and George opened a few more shops and with some financing from Harry, and started a franchise operation. While heavily leveraged with Harry to fund the expansion, their projected revenue for the year 2000 was nearly two million Galleons per year.

Remus still shared the defense teaching job with Moody, who continued to scare the crap out of the little witches and wizards. Both men liked their work, and got along acceptably with Headmistress McGonagall.

Hanna and Gretta continued to be best of friends. They were clever little witches with good hearts who enjoyed pranking people.

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1 April 2000

Every spring, Minerva and the Board of school governors extended an invitation to Harry to take over as Headmaster of Hogwarts. Harry liked the idea, and always felt an attachment to the castle. This morning with Hermione's blessing, he had accepted her offer to take over in the fall term.

Harry's entire aspect changed. He began getting up earlier and the morning, and with Hermione's help, learned the basics of the subjects that he'd never taken. He found that he rather enjoyed runes and arithmancy. Some things never changed. He still found history of magic to be dead boring. The board of governors encouraged him to evaluate the curriculums being offered, especially muggle studies. They had finally begun to realize that the young witches and wizards needed much more information to be able to effectively integrate into muggle society.

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1 September 2000

Harry was restless as he waited for the Hogwarts Express to arrive. The summer had brought many changes for him. Minerva had convinced him that his remarkable leadership and people skills would carry him until he acquired the actual experience to back him up. He'd hoped that he wouldn't mess up, either with the position, or with Hermione by being gone so much. She had quickly solved that issue and he was finalizing the arrangements to move his family to a lovely home in Hogsmede at the end of October. He would see her several evenings each week and on weekends. Harry finally realized why Dumbledore had left the memory in the pensive - They both found inner peace at the castle.



Ginny had delivered highly premature twin daughters earlier in the year. Hermione had convinced Ginny and Lee to allow them to cover the crushing medical bills and their relationship had finally righted itself. Both mum and the baby witches were fine and the Jordans had moved into the mansion to take advantage of the facility and the in-house healer that Harry had on staff. Molly never really changed her opinion of Harry, but he was on good terms with the rest of the rapidly expanding Weasley clan. Harry smiled, thinking that he would begin seeing an entire generation of Weasleys, Jordans, Finnigans, Longbottoms, and Potters in the castle within a few years.

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Harry smiled again when the young witches and wizards came in. Hanna and Gretta, now fifth years smiled and waved at him as they walked into the great Hall. "Good evening, Professor Potter." Harry would always be their favorite professor.

End

A/N

Thanks for (re)reading my story. This is my fourth ending to the story, and I'm quite happy with it. Shippers are entitled to their opinions and writers are entitled to theirs.

At the core of the story was the amazing level of magical power that Harry and the witches who loved him could generate together. They used it to defeat the dementors, Voldemort, and to heal a badly wounded Harry after the battle. Each of the teens and Tonks volunteered to place themselves in harms way. None of them were to blame for coping as best as they could.

In hindsight, I see Molly Weasley's inability to accept Harry's power that he knew not and Dr. Granger's suggestion that her daughter seize the moment as positions that directed the ending of the story to work out like it did. Many parents suffering through grief never fully come to grips with their loss.

The story rightfully didn't end up in a harem situation. The story was never about sex; rather love, acceptance of responsibility and personal sacrifice while under tremendous stress. In this sixth year story, Ginny's age worked against her. She simply fell apart under the crushing stress of the war, and couldn't find a way to keep her relationship with Harry together. I hope that no one saw, Harry, Ginny, Hermione, Tonks, Katie, Susan, Ron, Luna or Molly as bad people. They just did the best that they could, each of them failing at some point along the way.

Dumbledore certainly sacrificed his own life to aid Harry during the duel. In turn, he was able to die with honor and dignity that few of our parents would ever see. The Dumbledore in this story is quite a bit different than my No Thanks story. We will find out in a few weeks if Harry and Dumbledore effectively mend their relationship.

In this story Hermione chose to defend Harry, even if she was less than successful at it. Throughout the years at least as far as we've seen, she has always stood by Harry. Up to this point, Harry hasn't been able to say that about any of the other characters.

I hope JKR has a happy ending in store for Harry, and I hope that he ends up as headmaster.

Thanks again for reading my story. Please give Abraxan's story, The Refiners Fire a look. It is a great story.

Until next time,

O-C